

GREEN ISSUE: OCEANS & COASTS • DOWN WITH CAR CULTURE • RED-MEAT POLITICS

THE AMERICAN PROJECT

LIBERAL INTERVIEW

DECEMBER 2008



Our Moment.

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THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

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VOLUME 19 • NUMBER 12 DECEMBER 2008

"This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change."

—BARACK OBAMA, NOV. 4, 2008

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Haunted by the last eight years of incompetence and by Clinton's disastrous presidential transition, progressive groups are covering Obama's desk with plans and agendas for his first days in office. But is anyone reading them?

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Ocean ecosystems, from the shoreline to the deepest waters, are threatened by all manner of human activity, including pollution, overfishing, and market capitalism itself. The *Prospect* reports on the evolving crisis and considers some solutions, with contributions from guest editor **Roger D. Stone, Jeremy B.C. Jackson, James J. McCarthy, Colin Woodard, Nancy Knowlton, and Carl Safina**. Special thanks to the funders listed on page A2.

TAP ONLINE

This month at www.prospect.org, writing fellow **Tim Fernholz** inaugurates his weekly column on the presidential transition. Look for it on Thursdays. Our staff blog, TAPPED, and **Esra Klein** also consider the key policy questions of this new political era.



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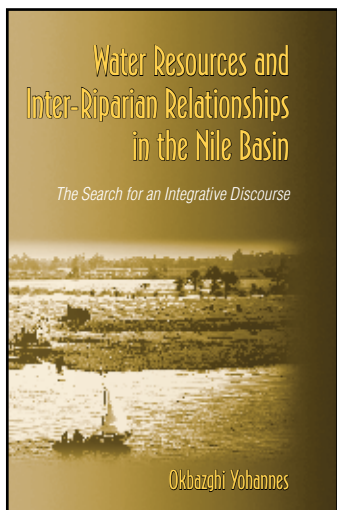
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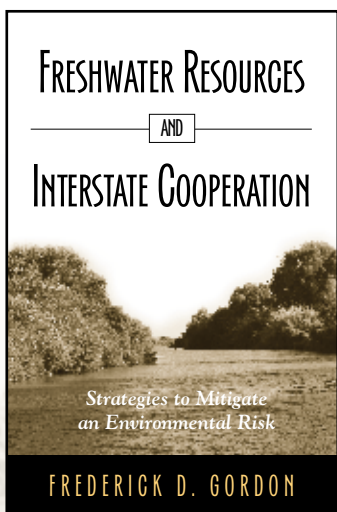
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The Realignment Opportunity

IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF THE ELECTION, two interpretations began circulating about its implications. The first came from conservatives who insisted that America remains a “center right” country and that the voters gave Barack Obama and the Democrats a majority

only because of the financial panic and the limitations of the McCain campaign. The second interpretation came from some liberals who promptly declared this to be one of those critical elections that mark a historic political realignment. Neither is the right way to read the returns.

The conservative interpretation ignores long-term trends in demography and public opinion that favor the Democrats. Since the early 1990s, younger voters have been moving in a more liberal direction, and Democrats have solidified their support among Latinos—the most rapidly growing group in the population. Surveys have shown a steady rise in tolerance on race and sexual orientation as well as large majorities in favor of universal health coverage and other measures requiring an active governmental role. George W. Bush’s two victories—the first only in the Electoral College, the second after September 11—may have just temporarily held in check a wave of increasing liberal and Democratic strength.

No doubt economic conditions were crucial to Obama’s victory, just as they were to Franklin Roosevelt’s in 1932. Every election turns on both immediate and long-run influences. But although the outcome this year was no sure thing, it was also no mere fluke. Democrats gained control of Congress in 2006 before the recession, and they have now won the popular vote in four out of the last five presidential elections.

The claim that America remains a

center-right country is an effort to deny a plain fact about the election. Republicans denounced Obama as a liberal, accusing him—horrors!—of wanting to redistribute income. Yet after waging an ideological campaign, they deny that the outcome had any ideological significance. So convenient a memory is a marvelous thing.

Nonetheless, the view that 2008 marks a historic realignment in favor of the Democrats is also misleading—or at least premature. Obama’s victory offers no guarantee of a realignment. It is only an opportunity to bring one about.

Some of those who saw a realignment in this year’s returns invoked the notion that American history is characterized by roughly a 30-year political cycle, each turn marked by a critical election. As the political scientist David Mayhew has shown, the historical evidence for critical elections is pretty shaky. In 1992, it seemed Bill Clinton’s election came right on schedule three decades after the New Frontier and Great Society, but a Democratic realignment didn’t materialize, because Clinton was unable to turn his personal victories into a lasting majority for his party.

The potential for a realignment, however, was already growing under Clinton. In 1997, in an article called “An Emerging Democratic Majority” (later the title

of a book by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira), I argued that long-term social trends favored the Democrats without guaranteeing them anything and suggested that the Democratic Party itself—not just the single-issue movements around it—could become a “cause.” Clinton didn’t create that cause, but ironically, Bush has. In recent years, for the first time since the 1960s, there has been a *movement* on the progressive side—and Obama has brought that movement into the Democratic Party and seems determined to keep it alive.

A genuine realignment will require several things. First, Obama has to get his program through Congress. Second, that program has to show real progress, beginning with economic recovery, in order for Democrats to at least hold their own in 2010 and for Obama to win reelection two years later. And, third, his presidency has to bring about long-term, sustainable institutional change that is understood as a Democratic achievement and serves as the formative struggle of a new political generation.

Of course, the real motive behind claims that this is a center-right country is to suggest that although Obama won a majority, he didn’t win a mandate, at least not for the full program he campaigned

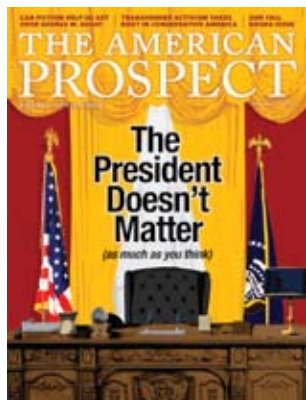
for. Having lost the election, conservatives want to win the debate over its interpretation and convince the public that the Democrats had better not “overplay” their hand and actually try to change institutions such as health care.

To be sure, the new administration will need to reach out, where possible, to gain support from Republicans and to make strategic choices

about the sequencing of reforms. Not everything need be done on day one. But there would be no surer way of wrecking the promise of change than backing off from it without a fight. On Nov. 4, America climbed a mountain, but the ultimate significance of the nation’s choice will depend on what’s on the other side. **TAP**

— PAUL STARR

Although the election this year was no sure thing, it was also no mere fluke.



GREAT ELECTORATE CHALLENGE

Taking associate editor **EZRA KLEIN**'s feature essay "Against the Great-Man Theory of the Presidency" one step further, **S. M. MILLER** of Brookline, Massachusetts, writes:

"The competitor to the Great Man/Men syndrome is the Great Electorate Challenge. ... The need is to promote a strong, continuing progressive grass roots, perhaps building on Obama's outstanding campaign organizations. Pressure from below may then ease the way to greatness in Washington. The progressive testing is less in Washington than in the nation's neighborhoods."

NO EASY ANSWERS

In his column "The Hardest Lesson," **ROBERT REICH** declares that politicians and journalists missed the biggest red flag signaling the collapse of the banking system: inequality. Reader **JAN SMITH** of Delaware, Ohio, writes that Reich's argument "is not quite complete. Capital investment is international, as Reich says, but labor is not. Moreover, the fall of communism greatly increased the world ratio of labor to capital stock. These two facts explain why the world market system has been shifting income from labor

to investment in virtually all national economies, thereby magnifying inequality.

"Deregulation can be corrected easily and quickly. Inequality cannot. That is to say, too much inequality—not just in the United States but in China and most other national economies—will be the enduring cause of the coming world depression. Last time around, in the 1930s, excess inequality was corrected unintentionally by world war." Let's hope that, this time around, we can find a better solution.

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

On Election Day, *TAP Online* contributing writer **COURTNEY E. MARTIN** told us "Why American Youth Will Vote." And the youth agreed with her. Wrote one reader, "My name is **JASON DUONG**, and I am a first-generation American. I'm voting to see someone who can identify with me and my family and our struggles. But that certainly isn't the only reason. Your article touched every reason as to why I wanted to and why I did vote in this election. It was not only inspiring but fulfilling, and I am honored to have stumbled upon it."

DePaul University student **DAN CROWLEY** was "moved to chills" by Martin's writing: "I have yet to find a commentator who has been fully capable of writing with the voice of our generation, until this morning." Crowley also gave his take on what youth were thinking on Election Day: "When Barack Obama spoke to us from Denver in the last days of August and asked us to 'keep the American promise, without wavering, to the hope that we confess, I prayed

it would not be lost as rhetoric but grasped by our generation." It appears Crowley's prayers have been answered.

PARTISAN PAPERS

In the weeks before the election, the Republican Party of Wisconsin circulated an anti-Obama mailer that quoted *TAP*'s own **EZRA KLEIN**—from an op-ed published in the **LOS ANGELES TIMES** back in 2006: "Obama is that oddest of all creatures: a leader who's never led." **THE HUFFINGTON POST** pointed out that Klein's op-ed was written "several months before

Obama even announced his candidacy. And one would be hard-pressed to find an article written by him since the launch of the campaign that praises John McCain as a more adept leader."

Indeed, Klein offered this to the Wisconsin GOP: "I'm Ezra Klein, and I do not approve this message."

Write to us at letters@prospect.org or to The Editors, The American Prospect, 1710 Rhode Island Ave., NW, 12th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. Or join the conversation online at www.prospect.org

FROM THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR

PRESIDENT-ELECT BARACK OBAMA MADE HIS FIRST appearance on this magazine's cover in February 2006, after one year in the U.S. Senate. "Obama wants nothing less than to redefine progressive values, make them more universal, and unite the country around them," Jodi Enda wrote then. "His first year in the Senate suggests a man on a long, ambitious, and intricate journey."

After the most dramatic campaign and momentous Election Day that anyone born since 1932 can recall, we are still at the very beginning of that journey. The question of how to make progressive values more universal and unite the country around them is the central challenge for this magazine as well, which is why we used the phrase "Our moment" on the cover. We finally have the chance to test the proposition that this country is ready for a vigorous and lasting commitment to equality and fairness. In this issue, I argue that Obama should (and probably will) take a patient and steady approach to enacting the big changes that will bring about a new political era. And Dayo Olopade reports on all the overlapping progressive efforts to shape the incoming administration's view of what's possible.

Environmental issues will be high on the new administration's agenda. Elsewhere in this issue, we look at some questions about the earth's future—from the kitchen table to the streets of New York to the halls of Congress. A special report on Oceans and Coasts gets deeper (no pun intended) into examining those vital and threatened ecosystems.

Finally, we introduce a new feature that will alternate with Robert Reich's column. In "My Back Pages," we'll give writers and public figures a chance to reminisce about a book that changed their view of politics or public life. Former executive editor Michael Tomasky inaugurates the feature with a timely choice. — MARK SCHMITT

Up Front



LOST OPPORTUNITIES

NOW THAT JOHN MCCAIN HAS BEEN DISPATCHED to Sedona, we're already starting to miss all those things that a McCain-Palin administration promised and portended. Joe the Plumber will not be our do-it-yourself infrastructure czar (scratch the "Hundred-Million Plungers" program). Cartographers will not be busily redrawing our nation's map to designate which parts are "the real America" and which aren't.

We'll miss the chance to see how long we can stay in Iraq for the sake of simply staying in Iraq. We'll also miss out on seeing how high a clothing bill Sarah Palin can run up in the space of four years and whether it will boost American consumption enough to end the recession.

Then there are those promises that may or may not be kept. Will Bristol Palin really marry Levi Johnston? Inquiring minds want to know.

OBAMA MAKES AMENDS

Over the course of the election, conservatives warned that Obama was "palling around with terrorists" and other un-American types like the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and '60s activist Bill Ayers. Obama vehemently denied it, of course. But now that he's been elected, the right wing must be frightened Obama will be re-paying—with plum government jobs—those he stiff-armed and disavowed on the way to the White House. So let's look at conservatives' nightmare scenario:

Obama will appoint his old buddy the Rev. Wright to be director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives—redirecting funds from ministers who God-damn America because it tolerates gays to ministers who God-damn America because it enslaved African Americans.

And after sitting in the same room with him at school-reform meetings of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, Obama will surely appoint Ayers to be secretary of education, in which capacity the old Weatherman is sure to convert No Child Left Behind into a madrassah program that teaches kids to become Muslim terrorists.

Rep. John Lewis of Georgia was the most recent person dissed by the Obama campaign, which responded

with less-than-full-throated support when the civil-rights icon made comparisons between John McCain and George Wallace. To make amends, Obama will probably appoint Lewis to head the Commission on Civil Rights, where Lewis will make Wallaces out of anyone who defies Obama.

OBAMA'S HALLIBURTON

It's not just personal debts he'll have to repay. Now that Barack Obama is the president-elect, he's going to need a shadowy organization on which to shower financial favors—a Halliburton of his own. If ACORN's fanciful right-wing critics (OK, that's redundant: all of its right-wing critics were fanciful) are to be believed, it would be the perfect organization to accomplish these important national-security tasks:

With provincial elections in Iraq set for January, ACORN should be contracted to help Iraqis register to vote, provided they can avoid registering Saddam Hussein.

That said, a little old-school subversion could go a long way in Iran, where ACORN could flood local election offices with enough bad registration forms to destabilize the regime.

And since everyone on the right agrees that ACORN forced the collapse of Lehman Brothers, why not send some ACORN activists to China to



**THE QUESTION:
WHAT WILL BE
THE FIRST THING
OBAMA DOES TO
DISAPPOINT US?**

"Declines to make freestyling over the 'A Milli' beat mandatory for taxpayers earning over \$250,000."
—**Spencer Ackerman**
reporter, Washington Independent



"Fails to immediately socialize the oil industry and redistribute the profits to ACORN."
—**Brian Cook**
associate editor, In These Times

"Admits he lied to the public about his identity. His middle name is not Hussein; it's Paul. He says he was just testing us."
—**Heather Gehlert**
managing editor, AlterNet

lobby for low-income housing? The fall of Chinese communism would be imminent.

Move over, CIA! The ACORN of conservative nightmares would be the perfect organization to wage a new cold war.

FACTS ON THE GROUND

OK—for the record, our president-elect is not now nor has he ever been a fundamentalist Muslim terrorist, black-nationalist radical, or member of the Communist Party. Nor, high-ranking sources tell us, is he the Antichrist.

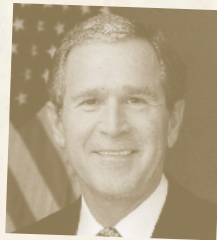
But just to irritate the "real America" set, let's review some true facts about the man we've elected to the highest office in the land. His middle name is indeed Hussein. His father was really a Kenyan polygamist alcoholic. His mother was a lefty, globe-trotting anthropologist. He admitted to doing coke and smoking pot in college. He began his political career as an urban community organizer in the mold of Saul Alinsky, author of *Rules for Radicals*. And he really did attend a black liberationist church, whose pastor married him and baptized his two daughters. And on Nov. 4, with all these facts long in the public domain, the American people elected Barack Obama president.

Restores your faith in democracy, no?

PARODY by T. A. Frank

T.A. Frank is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation.

BUSH WHITE HOUSE YEARBOOK
Staff Superlatives
2000 to 2008



Most athletic:
George W. Bush



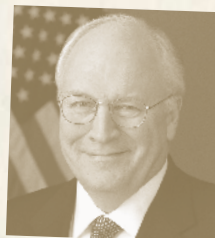
Best tailored:
Hank Paulson
(Goldman provides.)



Most resented by Cabinet colleagues for not being a complete failure:
Robert Gates



Best sense of humor:
Michael Mukasey
and the entire "repaired" DOJ



Most likely to try unsuccessfully to cushion news of Hague indictment with awkward appearance on SNL:
Dick Cheney



Most likely to make the case for an Obama presidency being a small price to pay for eight great years:
Karl Rove



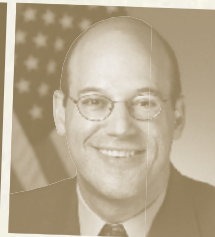
Smoothest talker:
Scott McClellan
"Snow to Eskimos"



Most likely to be mistaken for someone even remotely competent:
Condoleezza Rice



Most likely to be remembered as a completely immoral doofus:
Alberto Gonzales



Pimpest:
Ari Fleischer



Most likely to think in retrospect there are one or two things he might've done differently:
Colin Powell



Most likely to say "Maybe we'll look back on all this someday and laugh":
Michael Brown

Mind the Map

BY MARK SCHMITT

ON ELECTION NIGHT, OUR EYES WERE GLUED TO THE “battleground states” that would decide the presidential election—not just the traditional swing states of Ohio and Florida but Virginia and Indiana as well, on this new electoral map where all things had become possible.

But let’s take a moment to respect some states that weren’t considered battlegrounds. Wisconsin, for example, had been decided by the closest margins in the country in both of the previous presidential elections, 2000 and 2004. On Nov. 4, 2008, Barack Obama won Wisconsin by 14 points. Or Colorado, which had been an anchor of the Reagan-era “Sagebrush Rebellion,” home of conservative powerhouses like the Coors family and James Dobson. Bush won the state twice by solid margins, but John McCain, a senator from a neighboring state, gave up on it well before the election. Obama took Colorado by seven points.

The strong progressive majorities in these former swing states or Republican strongholds are not the accomplishment of the Obama campaign alone; they are more like a gift the campaign was given. Nor did political or partisan work entirely lay the groundwork for the transformations. Colorado and Wisconsin are arguably the best examples of successful progressive efforts to build capacity at the state level. These long-term efforts strengthened think tanks, issue advocacy groups, and community organizations and coordinated them around a common agenda and an awareness, within legal constraints, of elections and their consequences.

Some of the work began in the wake of the 2004 election, when donors recognized what activists had been telling them—that there was more to conser-

vative dominance than writing checks to candidates—and turned their attention to building progressive infrastructure. Some of the work goes back even further, such as to the unprecedented coordination of funding in Colorado that led to the Democratic takeover of the legislature and one U.S. Senate seat in 2004 and then to the modification of the state’s crippling tax limitation known as TABOR, which had bankrupted public services, in 2005.

This painstaking work paid dividends in 2008. Taking states like Wisconsin and Colorado off the board entirely gave Obama even more time, money, and human resources to concentrate on genuinely competitive states. And in addition to electoral votes, Obama’s agenda will now have the backing of two Democratic senators from Colorado—a first since 1979—and Congress will be rid of the odious Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, who once said that no issue was more important than banning gay marriage.

At times of liberal ascendancy, we risk forgetting these long-haul investments and organizing in the states. Liberals think of concerted federal action as essential to progress and fairness, an idea quite legitimately rooted in the

civil-rights movement and progressive victories like Medicare. And all our thoughts right now are on the transformative possibilities of an Obama administration and supportive Congress. But after three decades of devolution, there’s no turning back from the reality that states, their governors, legislators, and parties will play a central role in our country’s political future.

Further, the conservative comeback, if there is to be one, will take hold in the states, not in Congress. The recession will devastate state finances, and Democratic governors will be vulnerable. A wave of Republican governors with the good luck to be in office on the other side of the economic cycle could look like geniuses and might even revive the now thoroughly discredited idea that conservatives can govern. Conservative success in the 1990s and into the Bush years had far more to do with the big-state Republican governors who were seen as successful—George Voinovich in Ohio, Tommy Thompson in Wisconsin, Bill Owens in Colorado, John Engler in Michigan—than with the impeachment-crazed congressional Republicans. And ideas like welfare reform and standards-based education were made credible by state experience.

Financial support for state and local governments should be a central component of any economic stimulus, because it both provides a bigger boost than other spending and will help these states manage through the crisis. But it’s also essential that the work of building progressive infrastructure at the state level—which is really in its infancy—continues,

for all the reasons that conservatives invested in state and regional think tanks and organizing efforts. The states are where ideas are generated and tested, where programs really succeed or fail in helping improve lives, and, incidentally, where elections of the future will be won or lost. **TAP**

The conservative comeback, if there is to be one, will take hold in the states, not in Congress.

Don't Call It a Culture War

BY ANN FRIEDMAN

AS THE ELECTION-NIGHT RESULTS ROLLED IN—and even before that, as the polling leaned heavily toward Barack Obama—some liberals gleefully declared the end of the so-called culture war. This war's two most reliable weapons, demonizing same-sex marriage

and decrying abortion rights, failed to propel Republican candidates to victory—supposedly indicating that so-called cultural issues had lost their bite. Wrote Peter Beinart in *The Washington Post*, “Culture war no longer sells.”

Obama's landslide victory prompted many progressives to declare that the long-awaited Democratic majority had finally emerged. But watching the most momentous election in a generation was bittersweet. Despite the supposed ceasefire in the culture war, Nov. 4 saw the passage of four heartbreakingly bigoted ballot measures: same-sex marriage bans in California, Florida, and Arizona, along with an Arkansas initiative designed to prohibit same-sex couples from adopting or foster-parenting. This is a call to arms. Progressives should not declare the culture war dead; we must reframe it and keep fighting.

We'll continue to lose until we can successfully relabel LGBT rights a *civil*-rights issue situated firmly within the context of other civil-rights struggles, not an issue mired in the culture-war swamp of moral controversy. (To a lesser degree, the same goes for abortion rights.) “Culture” implies we are comfortable with different parts of our country and different groups of people seeing this issue differently. It implies that there is no absolute right or wrong—just two sparring factions—and that we'll simply have to wait for the rest of the country to come around. Culture changes slowly.

This is something I've heard a lot in the wake of the passage of California's Proposition 8, which bans same-sex marriage. “History is on our side! Don't worry, the demographic trends are with us!”

I'm sorry, but that's just not good enough. These are the kind of conciliatory comments that go part and parcel with the culture-war frame. Civil-rights era activists knew history was on their side. But their goal was not to make every white American comfortable with the idea of sharing public spaces and power with people of color. It was to *guarantee* people of color those rights, regardless of where the culture stood. That's the thing about rights. You have to claim them.

We won't win victories on LGBT rights as long as we see the issue as part of a liberal-versus-conservative war. If we're at war, it's not with conservatives. Our enemy is not James Dobson or Sarah Palin. It is the sadly accepted notion that anti-gay measures are shoo-ins on the ballot, and that same-sex couples just have to sit tight for a decade or two and wait for public opinion to catch up.

A civil-rights frame is not only more

proactive—because it doesn't allow progressives to swaddle themselves in comforting demographic trends—it is more persuasive. It is also less divisive. The very act of invoking the term “culture war” signals that we think something is controversial, when in fact, equal rights should be the furthest thing from it. In California, the opposition to Proposition 8 reached out with an appeal to empathy, instead of an appeal to fundamental civil rights and justice. (From a typical ad: “What if you couldn't marry the person you love?”) Who knows how effective a civil-rights frame would have been in persuading California voters to reject Prop 8, with a series of ads featuring interracial couples who were legally barred from marrying just 40 years ago?

It's tempting for progressives to see Obama's election as a sign the country is becoming more liberal. It's tempting to look at his progressive stance on a range of issues and determine that, if the public elected him by a landslide, it *must* agree with the bulk of his agenda. It's tempting to get choked up when he declares that, gay or straight, we're

all Americans. And it's tempting to ignore that although the president-elect opposes state constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage, he has said he can't support gay marriage itself. The harsh reality is that, just as the whole of the country wasn't rabidly conservative when it elected and re-elected George W. Bush, today's America is no progressive wonderland. This is laid bare by the passage of the anti-gay measures, and it's the reason I chafe at the notion that these

are the first days of a new progressive era. Because if our time had truly come, bigotry on the ballot wouldn't be a sure thing. And fundamental civil rights wouldn't be perceived as a minor culture-war skirmish. **TAP**

*We'll continue to
lose on same-sex
marriage until
we successfully
remove LGBT
rights from the
culture-war
swamp of moral
controversy.*

The Audacity of Patience

Obama's savvy coalition-building broke all the rules about how to run for president. If he can take the same approach in the White House, he will be a towering success.

BY MARK SCHMITT

A single tactical choice early in Barack Obama's quest for the presidency set the course for all the events that followed—Obama's securing of the Democratic nomination and surprisingly smooth path to resounding victory in the general election. After Sen. Hillary Clinton defeated him in the New Hampshire primary, rather than pouring resources into the very next primary states, Obama campaign manager David Plouffe looked weeks into the future. He deployed staff to states that wouldn't vote for another month and implemented a long, patient strategy of assembling a majority of delegates, one at a time, in friendly and unfriendly states alike.

The move broke all the rules for an insurgent candidate, which is what Obama was at the time. There is a tried-and-true strategy for insurgents—what President George H.W. Bush in 1980 called “Big Mo”—momentum. Only a wave of victories in early states can overcome the superior nationwide organization of an establishment candidate like Clinton, the theory goes. Insurgents can't waste time thinking about the months ahead. Momentum is a rapidly depleted resource.

Plouffe's choice was not the last time that the Obama campaign would gamble on patience and the long view, despite admonitions from those with more experience that he was blowing the moment. Only six weeks before Election Day, William Galston, a political theorist and Democratic campaign brain since the 1970s, led a chorus of public criticism, warning Obama, “You are in danger of squandering an election most of us thought was unlosable,” as John McCain seemed to “win the news cycle” on too many days. Then the financial crisis broke, and while McCain was frantically trying to seize the role of bipartisan broker on an issue he knew nothing about, it was Obama's calm clarity that lured a wave of moderates, independents, centrists, and prominent Republicans into the ever-widening circle of his coalition.

Obama will need a full reservoir of that same patience in the White House, because he'll face similar frantic pressure and second-guessing. He will be surrounded by a crippling crowd of people and groups convinced that if their own No. 1 cause isn't enacted in the first 100 days, it will never happen. The conventional wisdom about the presidency is very much the

same as the advice Obama was given in the primaries: Move quickly. Overwhelm the forces of the establishment. Use the momentum of the election to achieve the biggest things possible. You'll never be more powerful than on Jan. 21.

If Obama ignores this conventional wisdom, he will not do so because he's crazy or lazy but because he's taking the same approach to governing as he took to the election. It will mean he's taking the long view, gambling on patience, and carefully putting into place the pieces that win lasting majorities for progressive policies, just as he won a majority of delegates and a majority of votes in the election.

ON THE DAY AFTER THE 2004 election, George W. Bush declared, “I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it.” He announced that he would privatize Social Security and revamp the tax system by the following spring. In Bush's version of the conventional wisdom, the presidency was a rapidly depreciating financial asset, and he had to act quickly.

But Bush was wrong. The error was fatal. The collapse of his own presidency, the Republican brand, and the McCain candidacy can be traced to that moment of macho strutting as surely as to the “Mission Accomplished” moment on the *USS Abraham Lincoln*. The fact was Bush had earned no political capital; he had no mandate for the policies he now intended to pursue. All he had won was the raw institutional power of the presidency and control of Congress. He pushed that power further than any president before him, including Richard Nixon. And in doing so, Bush found its limits. The institutional power of the presidency, combined with a compliant one-party Congress, can start wars, enrich predatory capitalism, and destroy long-established norms, but alone it cannot do what Karl Rove aspired to, which was to build a new and lasting political order. That work requires patience and diligence.

Bush's mistake was an unsurprising one. It is rooted in the naïve idea that presidents get a mandate from their election in the same way a gyroscope gets its spin. The bigger the victory, the bigger the mandate, and as time passes, the mandate diminishes. Bush didn't have a big victory in 2004, but it was at least a solid,



uncontested affirmation, and he decided that with a little extra spin and some abuse of power, he could get more out of it.

For all the romance of Franklin D. Roosevelt's first 100 days, history suggests that presidents do not get a mandate as a mechanical function of their electoral margin, but in fact they build it over time. They earn it not by winning but by governing. They assemble coalitions and use them again and again, and build institutions and make them work. While many good policies and necessary emergency measures were passed in the first 100 days of the New Deal, the innovations that lasted—those that defined politics until Reagan—came later, after FDR had consolidated power, forced the Supreme Court to accept a new set of assumptions about government's role in the economy, and won the 1934 mid-term election. Similarly, Reagan did not win a decisive mandate for conservative policies in 1980;

rather, like Obama, he was the beneficiary of a coalition made up of equal parts support for his conservatism and revulsion at the previous administration's incompetence. It was not until August 1981, when he assembled bipartisan coalitions to pass his budget- and tax-cutting plans, that Reagan can be said to have had a mandate for conservative policies.

This is not to say that there aren't things that need to be done immediately, such as economic stimulus, closing Guantánamo, and a plan to get out of Iraq. But the changes that will bring about a new political era call for a more patient and steady approach.

Like Roosevelt and Reagan, Obama has the opportunity to become what the political scientist Stephen Skowronek calls a "reconstructive leader," a type that he notes often follows a failed presidency. "John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, John

DAVID GUTTENFELDER / AP IMAGES



Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson, James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln, Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan—these repeated historical pairings ... suggest nothing so much as an intimate connection between manifest incapacity and towering success in presidential leadership,” Skowronek wrote the year George W. Bush was elected. Reconstructive leaders “are party builders; they use their authority to consolidate a coalition that will support the new agenda and dominate electoral politics.”

IF OBAMA IS TO BE A reconstructive leader, the first question is what kind of coalition he will be able to consolidate—how broad, how sturdy, and with what at its center. Only after these questions are answered can we say what’s possible in the agenda for the coming era in American politics.

No president has ever spoken as clearly and openly about coalition-building as Obama, presumably because no other president has begun his career as a community organizer. Obama’s victory speeches in the primaries always had at their heart a vision of adding to and broadening the coalition. He started with a base of younger or better-educated liberal Democrats (the “wine track” voters drawn to “beautiful losers” like Gary Hart, the dead-end category where conventional thinkers like Ronald Brownstein of the *National Journal* were certain Obama’s campaign would begin and end); then pulled in African Americans; then reached rural voters in the caucus states. Then, nomination in hand, Obama built his campaign out to encompass the white, working-class Democrats and women who had supported Hillary Clinton in the primary; then Latinos; then independents. Finally, after McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin as his running mate and his foolish response to the financial crisis alienated the last sensible Republicans, the Obama coalition came to include Colin Powell and actual conservatives like Christopher Buckley, along with voters in traditionally conservative states like Indiana. And Obama did all this without losing an ounce of the enthusiasm of the younger liberals who formed the core of his coalition.

Those who were skeptical of Obama’s chances, from late 2007 through the Galston call to arms in mid-September, were not without reason. They didn’t question Obama’s skills but doubted his, or anyone’s, ability to sustain such an ever-widening coalition. Choices would have to be made, much as Bill Clinton had to scuttle his center-left coalition and form a center-right coalition to win re-election. A coalition of liberals and African Americans would alienate working-class white Democrats, Obama’s detractors claimed. The coalition that outlasted Hillary Clinton in the primaries could never make peace with her furious, exhausted backers. An emphatically Democratic coalition, rooted in the vision of a strong party that began with Howard Dean’s 50-state strategy, could hardly hope to attract independents. And, the skeptics maintained, Obama’s language about reaching Republicans was surely nothing more than empty rhetoric, nice to say but unrealistic given the intransigent partisanship of the Republican right. Yet somehow, each new piece of the coalition fell into place without the existing base losing any numbers or enthusiasm.

Two prevailing theories about how Obama should govern seem to have emerged, and both rest on doubts about the stability of the broad coalition. One faction argues that if Obama tries to govern from the center-left, from his own agenda and the core of his constituency, he will face an immediate backlash from centrist voters and conservative Blue Dog Democrats in Congress. Clinton adviser Mark Penn, as well as many conventional thinkers in the media, argue from the experience of the Clinton presidency, urging Obama to reconstruct the centrist coalition that Clinton put together after the 1994 backlash. That, of course, is a formula for small ambitions and limited change, squandering the opportunity to build a new political era.

Liberals argue that no matter what Obama does, moderate Republicans and Blue Dogs will defect from the coalition, and wealthy lobbyists will obstruct progress. They say Obama’s best

hope is to act quickly and with overwhelming force—a “liberal shock doctrine,” as Rick Perlstein put it in these pages over the summer. It’s a version of John Edwards’ argument during the primaries: Power never gives up without a fight, so take on the fight at the peak of your own power. Get major legislation—on health care, climate change, ending the war, and possibly fixing the tax code—enacted quickly if sloppily, using parliamentary tricks like the budget reconciliation process as ruthlessly as Bush did. When programs like health care are facts on the ground, the thinking goes, they will acquire an enthusiastic constituency in much the way Medicare and Social Security have.

This approach has downsides as well. Like many of the McCain campaign’s actions, it is a high-stakes, impatient gamble. If the shock doctrine strategy blows up in some way, the loss can be total, much like Bush’s disastrous attempt to privatize Social Security without building broad support. And if the shock doctrine does succeed, legislation produced in this way can be deeply flawed, often undermining rather than building its own support. Big changes like the New Deal or Reagan’s economics take time and patience; old assumptions need to be challenged and new forms of consensus built.

Given that Obama’s expanding coalition was sustainable through the long journey from Iowa to Election Day, what if we assume it could be sustained and even consolidated in the White House? Rooted in the center-left, but reaching Blue Dog Democrats, independent voters, and a few Republican legislators, it would not always be the same coalition, but like Reagan’s, an evolving, overlapping, flexible majority. Reagan brought in very conservative Southern Democrats to pass the first budget cuts but found common ground with liberal and moderate Democrats on the tax reform of 1986 and with each step strengthened the conservative consensus. Obama could do the same for a new liberal consensus.

THE MASSIVE RESISTANCE Republicans posed to Clinton in 1993 is impossible to imagine today. The Republican coalition is utterly shattered, and the angry white Palin wing of the party, for all its visibility, is a minority even within a minority. What’s in it for a moderate Republican senator like Richard Lugar of Indiana (who tacitly endorsed Obama), Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, or Olympia Snowe of Maine to resist Obama on health care or climate change? At their age, they will never be in the majority again, and they surely don’t want their legacies to be nothing but obstruction. While their support may not be needed to pass legislation, it will strengthen the sense of public consensus and consultation, just as Ted Kennedy’s support of Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act helped build broad acceptance of a radical change in education policy.

On the Democratic side of the coalition, the more conservative Blue Dogs of the majority are still far more liberal than the real conservative Democrats of the Clinton era, who, when they later

changed parties, turned out to be among the most right-wing of Republicans. The Blue Dogs are fundamentally economic populists, albeit with a real concern about the federal budget deficit, which serves partly as a symbol of Bush-era mismanagement. But the economic crisis has brought a new consensus that, at least in the short term, the deficit should be allowed to rise, which may make coalitions involving Blue Dogs easier to build on some issues. On other issues, such as labor-law reform, a few Northern Republicans like Specter might make up for the loss of a few Blue Dogs.

To consolidate the broad coalition, Obama, like other constructive leaders, will have to challenge some of the assumptions and institutions that come from the old era, just as FDR couldn’t make lasting change until he had broken the Supreme Court’s prevailing beliefs about the limits to government involvement in the economy. Many of those assumptions are falling already. The financial bailout and failure of deregulation have broken the “Washington Consensus” about markets. The recession has broken

the obsession with short-term deficit reduction, although the idea remains that a long-term crisis limits our choices. The debate about taxation in the campaign, while constrained by Obama’s promise of a tax cut for everyone earning less than \$150,000, by the end nonetheless revealed a broad acceptance that the better-off have more responsibility to pay for public goods, breaking the Reagan-era assumption that taxes are poison to liberal aspirations. The grueling six years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan have opened up a new willingness to see America’s role not just as a matter of toughness but as a question of a shared destiny.

As the old assumptions crumble, the challenge for Obama is not just to pass legislation but to build the foundations of a new vision that is large enough to meet the new era, and bring not just political success, but, like FDR’s and Reagan’s long eras, the kind of consensus that lives through 30 years of Democratic and Republican administrations alike. (Or perhaps some new party yet unknown.) That’s not the work of 100 days. It’s not something that can be done with use of raw executive power and a congressional super-majority. It’s a matter of organizing, education, and redefining the questions.

If Obama can achieve this, he will not only be another “towering success” who follows a manifest failure, he will rewrite the rules of presidential leadership, just as he rewrote the rules about building a coalition to win the White House.

In one of the first articles about Obama’s political career, from when he was first running for the Illinois Senate in 1995, he is quoted as telling the crowd that “it’s time for politicians and other leaders to ... see voters, residents, or citizens as producers of change. ... What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer, as part teacher and part advocate, one who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real choices before them?”

That “what if?” will now be answered on the largest stage in the world. **TAP**

OBAMA'S BROAD COALITION WAS SUSTAINABLE ALL THE WAY FROM IOWA TO ELECTION DAY—WHAT IF HE COULD SUSTAIN AND EVEN CONSOLIDATE IT IN THE WHITE HOUSE?

The Paper Chase

Dozens of progressive institutions are clamoring to put their agendas on Obama's desk. Will the incoming president actually read them?

BY DAYO OLOPADE

The last time Democrats took the White House, they managed, in the immortal words of George W. Bush, a “heckuva job.” During the Clinton administration’s famously rocky transition, one White House alumna saw signs of trouble early. “The day after the election, we were getting calls from leaders all over the world,” she says, but apparently Clinton’s team hadn’t realized the State Department now worked for them. Martha Kumar, founder of the bipartisan White House Transition Project, recalls the story of one Clinton flack who “walked into his office and saw there were six phone lines and all of the phones were ringing.” Tellingly, only one question came to his mind: “If I answer them, what do I say?”

Now that Barack Obama has won the White House, the rapture of those who put him there will be eclipsed only by the countrywide yawp for justice deferred. The stakes today are even higher than in 1992—Obama faces two wars, a financial meltdown, mounting inequality, restless enemies, and a simmering planet—and progressives have been sweating ink to ensure that they aren’t caught flat-footed again. No fewer than 20 progressive think tanks, issue groups, media outlets, and ad-hoc coalitions have already or will soon release presidential transition plans. These open letters to the next president boast sweeping and ambitious titles: “Investing in America’s Future”; *Mandate for Change*; “Opportunity ’08”; *Rebooting America*; “Making Sense”; “Transitions in Governance”—as do their sponsors: the Campaign for America’s Future, the Institute for Policy Studies, the Progressive Policy Institute, the New America Foundation, USAction, the journal *Democracy*, the Brookings Institution. Even the Heritage Foundation has a “to-do list.” (Don’t try to mix and match.) “There will be dozens and dozens of these things,” says Peter Wallison, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute once rumored to be on the shortlist for a McCain Cabinet.

Many of these transition agendas take their cues from the conservative movement, which, following Barry Goldwater’s 1964 defeat, felled thousands of trees in the name of Republican institution-building. Likewise, the exile of the Bush years has produced an architecture of progressive ideas that did not exist for the Democratic presidents of the 20th century, including Clinton. “Every group worth their salt has a plan for

transition,” says Mark Green, president of Air America radio and collaborator on the Center for American Progress Action Fund’s *Change for America*, perhaps the largest and most influential of the transitional care packages. “Let’s say you care about soil erosion. Well, you sort of have to say, ‘Here’s our plan to reduce soil erosion in the United States.’”

The left, preening for its close-up, has recognized that there is virtue in being prepared. So this year, that which can be tabbed, spiral-bound, or indexed has been. The ancient tradition of presidential advice-giving, once analog, is now industrial. The brief taste of change that Democrats enjoyed after reclaiming Congress in 2006 has only fueled this rush to paper Obama’s desk. As Green says, in his best announcer voice, “To the winner goes the policy spoils.”

TODAY’S DEMOCRATIC PARTY tends to look to two periods in history when we took major steps toward a more liberal society: from 1933 to 1938, when the New Deal reforms were enacted (Social Security, a minimum wage, health and safety standards on the job) and from 1965 to 1966, when the Great Society (the Voting Rights and Civil Rights acts) was passed into law. For many liberals, 2009 portends the Next Deal (which is, naturally, the name of the USAction coalition’s transition agenda). Robert Borosage, president of Campaign for America’s Future (CAF), knows we’ve experienced “a sea change election, and [Obama is] going to have a big mandate, and he’s going to have a country in deep trouble.” To CAF, USAction, and the other K Street groups waving binders at the new administration, such nagging is more than ideological inclination—it’s a historic duty.

Add to this compulsion the fact that Obama ran an entire campaign premised on change; the very vagueness of the term has made the race to define it for him all the more urgent. Naturally, “change” means “everything” to those Washington liberals who have spent the Bush years in despair. Most progressive groups I spoke with cited health care, a new energy policy, and a draw-down in Iraq as the big three priorities for the new Democratic administration. The diverse literature of transition, however, suggests a wealth of approaches to these priorities and others. “There’s no question that the marketplace of Washington think tanks is much more crowded today than it was in the early 1990s,”

says Will Marshall, head of the centrist Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) and author of the original *Mandate for Change*, the group's precocious but less effectual 1992 transition offering.

And there aren't just a lot of plans. There are a lot of pages in each plan. The Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) is releasing a 40-chapter book this month pulling together essays from top progressive thinkers and leaders advising the president-elect. CAF has already published a 10-section "guide to kitchen table issues," pushing for such major reforms as universal health care and quality education. USAction's book on the "Next New Deal" was published this July, and PPI's serial "Memos to the Next President" will be bound and duly distributed come January. Some incarnations of the genre are entirely pop: Brookings has partnered with ABC News on a set of videographic transition memos. *Wired* magazine and the New America Foundation have put out a glossy spread of profiles and essays directed toward "President X" from avant-garde scientists and specialists, while *In These Times* recently made provocative, though improbable, recommendations for positions in the Obama Cabinet. (Rep. Jim McDermott of Washington state for secretary of state?)

Then there is the cadre of single-issue advocacy groups who've thrown their white papers into the ring—enviros, health-care reformers, Social Security defenders, government transparency zealots. Some are looking for easy, small-bore wins. "There is some low-hanging fruit," says IPS Director John Cavanagh, who cites reducing defense spending and revising Latin American trade policy as attainable goals of his group's transition agenda. Richard Kirsch, national campaign manager of Health Care for America Now, a sprawling, CAF-affiliated project, says the network wants, well, health care now—"with a focus on doing it very early in the next administration. Our entire campaign is structured with that purpose in mind." A tome released by Van Jones, the founder and president of the environmental-justice group Green For All, proposes "elegant solutions for our economic and environmental crises," emphasizing investment rather than the regulatory fixes that cause gridlock on the Hill. And the National Security Network wants an early statement on climate change or human rights, says executive director Heather Hurlburt, "something that doesn't necessarily get at the thorniest long-term problems but immediately says, 'We think there are different approaches to this problem.'"

But the heaviest-hitting transition rubric isn't a laundry list of

policy priorities. It's a procedural blueprint. *Change for America*, released in mid-November by the CAP Action Fund, advises the next administration not simply what to say when the phone rings but who should answer it. CAP's playbook method is heavily informed by concerns about personnel and process—which distinguishes it from some other publications that privilege general policy, with nods to good governance throughout.

Not to mention the fact that one of CAP's own, its president, John Podesta, is *actually* running Obama's transition team. Green describes the volume as "a 600-page, soup-to-nuts, agency-by-agency progressive transition report." His co-editor, CAP senior fellow Michele Jolin, claims it answers the question "What are the things that the new heads of these agencies are going to need to do on day one, in the first 100 days, the first year, and in the long term?"

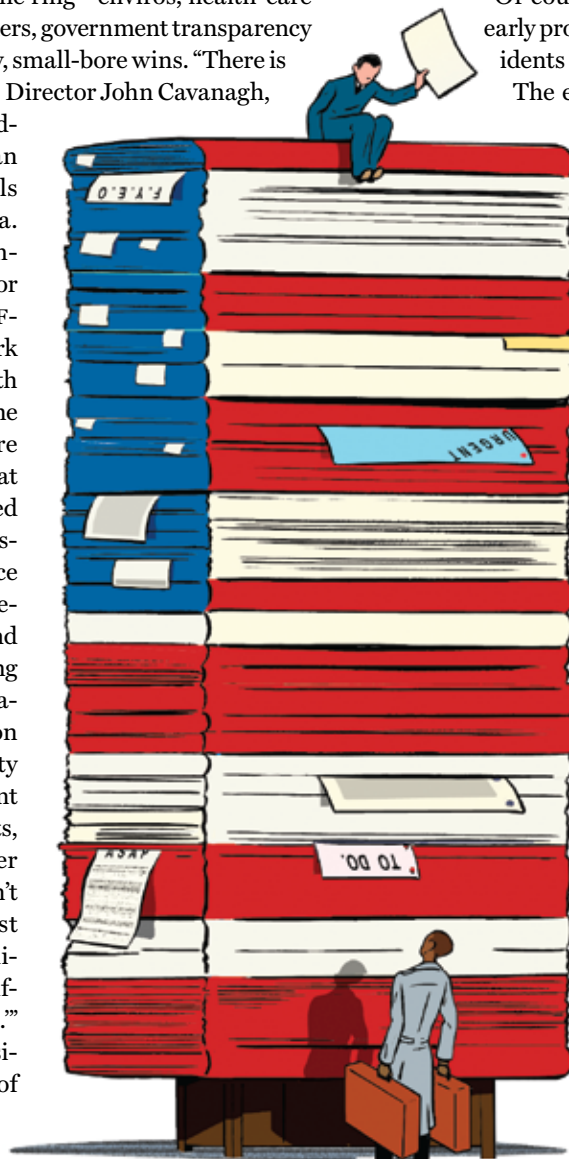
NO MATTER HOW FORWARD-looking the liberal agenda, the idea that incoming presidents need a bible of governing minutiae has a long history on both sides of the aisle, from the playmaking of FDR's now-mythic first 100 days to the right-wing idea mill that birthed the Reagan revolution.

Of course, the New Deal set the standard for early progressive victories—and Democratic presidents have been looking to imitate it ever since.

The earliest attempt to recreate the magic of

1933 was a decidedly low-tech affair. Richard Neustadt, a former staffer of Roosevelt's White House, prepared a series of typed memoranda for John F. Kennedy prior to Inauguration Day, 1961. Neustadt's retrograde views on secretaries aside ("You will want to find an appropriate title for her"), he offers a barrage of helpful tips, provocative questions, and shrewd directives to the president-elect. Beware of "promissory notes" to friends and enemies both. Shall the first meetings with congressional leadership be "intimate sessions à la FDR, or ambassadorial encounters, à la Eisenhower?" And if and when the hordes begin to gather at the gates on Pennsylvania Avenue, "you need somebody else to take the heat, pass the word, fend off the importunate, and soothe the disappointed."

Such gentility somehow escaped the conservative makers of the next authoritative voice on transition. The sprawling, 1,100-page volume titled *Mandate for Leadership*—conceived of and placed on Ronald Reagan's desk by the then-adolescent Heritage Foundation in 1980—was described as "a blueprint for grabbing the gov-



ernment by its frayed New Deal lapels.” Reportedly, Reagan handed a copy to each of his Cabinet officers, and *Mandate* became a veritable bible for the Gipper’s first term. Conservative columnist William F. Buckley Jr. wrote that “the foundation had a great hour when Ronald Reagan was elected president and found waiting for him three volumes of Heritage material.”

Heritage now trumpets *Mandate*—updated in 1989 as “a guide for Bushmen”—as “well established in Washington, well accepted by American voters, and well understood everywhere.” It was certainly well accepted and understood by the progressive establishment, which saw the tome as the primary reason for the runaway success (by conservative standards) of Reagan’s early years. Kumar saw the Heritage’s disciplinary model pay dividends for George W. Bush as well: “He didn’t have to talk about the murky outcome of the election. If he hadn’t had a clear agenda, he would have had a vacuum there that could easily have been filled by the critics.” But Mike Lux, an alumnus of the Clinton White House communications team who was recently named the progressive liaison for the Obama transition, emphasizes the comparative discipline of the Reagan moment rather than the specifics of the Heritage proposals as a reason for conservative success. “It wasn’t so much that the Heritage strategy worked [than] that the Reagan transition worked,” he says. “They were more focused; they understood what they were doing going into it.”

By contrast, the Clinton years were lean indeed. Will Marshall, whose Democratic Leadership Council bred Clinton and tried to guide those first 100 days in office, says of that transition: “The best word to describe it begins with ‘cluster.’” In addition to various political embarrassments surrounding early Cabinet nominations, adds Cavanagh, Clinton “walked into a Republican fight” on issues like gays in the military, and by spending political capital on the North American Free Trade Agreement, “divided his base completely and set a lot of his natural allies against him.” By the time a Hillary Clinton–led task force emerged with a plan for health-care reform, the single-payer activists of the moment felt thoroughly alienated, and a fickle Congress abandoned ship. Of course, when the 1994 midterms arrived, Clinton’s momentum—and the Democratic majority—were lost.

Though Clinton went on to have a successful presidency, responsibility for some of the early bobbles can be traced back to the transition moment. For one, a rusty party apparatus wasn’t prepared for change. “We hadn’t had a Democratic transition in 16 years,” says Lux. And Clinton’s Arkansan posse proved, practically and stylistically, ill-equipped to take over Washington. Lux describes a call he got from Clinton aide Mark Gearan just days before inauguration, telling him to head for Little Rock: After flying south with a half-dozen other bewildered D.C. operatives, “we basically learned what our actual job and title would be about a half hour before the announcement,” he says. “That was the way the White House staff was chosen.” Terry McAuliffe, a 1990s chairman of the Democratic National Committee who is still close with both Clintons, says, “If you asked Bill Clinton he would say, of course he’d do things differently.”

Today, of course, the Obama people have studied the Clinton order of operations—and have proceeded to enlist many of those who possess, for better or worse, hard-won hindsight.

The conscription of Podesta to manage Obama’s transition was just the first hint that old hands would occupy key spots around the crowded kitchen table. Podesta’s people have been relentless about cataloging best practices on personnel, protocol, and agency operations. (In addition to the CAP Action Fund text, Podesta has penned his own book, complete with a draft inaugural address.) Clearly, the insiders aim to avoid the rookie mistakes that have plagued previous Democratic presidents. Another Clinton White House alum now heavily involved in 2009 planning says of the Clinton transition, “We were very young and very enthusiastic and we got buffeted by events.”

SOMEWHAT IRONICALLY, the missteps of every Democratic transition since Neustadt’s era have left today’s progressives with Reaganauts for forebears. Borosage, whose reference copy of *Mandate for Leadership* anchors his office bookcase, freely admits that his transition strategy borrows from the conservative movement. “It’s a best practice,” he says. “Heritage in these cases was extremely influential.” Green, who also keeps an edition close at hand, calls *Mandate* the “godfather.” Cavanagh is also hagiographic about Republican brilliance on this front: The conservative-ideas industry is “big, it’s well organized, it’s top-down, it has foot soldiers. ... It works well,” he notes almost wistfully. “If you look at the progressive map, it’s about 10,000 organizations, many of whom don’t interact.”

Although that, too, has changed—and the white papers prove it. “Just five years ago the Center for American Progress, the *Huffington Post*, Air America didn’t exist, and MoveOn was at half its strength,” says Green. “The grass-roots and intellectual energy is far greater on the left now than it was in 2004.” Borosage, in addition to his role at CAF, is a creator and convener of the Tuesday Group, a confederation of principals from large unions, progressive citizen groups, and think tanks, as well as certain Hill staffers. The coalition meets biweekly with the goal of giving the left “priorities and a common language”—which they believe will help an Obama administration. At an October meeting, informal and more direct strategies for transition were tossed about, including advice from individuals working directly with Obama’s team. Numerous individuals in attendance praised this focused, collegial dynamic, which deflates somewhat the presumption that the left is a messy band of believers unable to effect change. The fate of health-care reform in 1993 may have been quite different for Hillary Clinton if such a base had been at the disposal of her husband’s White House.

And if the Tuesday Group recalls anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist’s infamous Wednesday morning breakfasts between elite members of the conservative establishment, participants are unashamed. “It’s very similar to the Norquist group,” says CAF co-director Roger Hickey after leaving the gathering at the AFL-CIO headquarters. “We’re now much more sophisticated about organizing to have an impact.”

The left has brought this same spirit of rehabilitated pugilism to the present moment. Appropriately, the Roosevelt Institution, a progressive student think tank with its own transition pamphlet, believes that the transition is “about setting the tone of the debate,” says executive director Nathaniel

Loewentheil. “There are lots of people who are coming in with centrist ideas and lowered expectations, and I think we have a right to say we expect a government can do all of these things.” As Cavanagh of IPS puts it, “There’s a lot that we can achieve by just getting good ideas to the right people.”

But when it comes to ideas, team Obama hasn’t exactly been rattling the cup. In fact, McAuliffe said in October, “This campaign has gone on for so long, clearly the Obama campaign knows exactly where he wants to take the country. That’s the benefit of having a two-year campaign.” Between *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama’s own ink-as-ideology biography, and the “300-person foreign-policy campaign bureaucracy” for which he was briefly mocked this summer, it seems that redundancy should be a major concern of well-meaning entities on the left.

Other modern presidencies offer mixed counsel. Peter Walilison explains that “[Reagan] did actually look at and read things that he thought would actually be helpful to him in governing. But I don’t think in general presidents pay very much attention.” Clay Johnson, the deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget who was tasked with managing one of the more absurd transitions in history—the recount-delayed turnover between Clinton and Bush in 2000—began his planning in the spring of 1999. He is helping to facilitate this year’s transition as well and says of the various progressive agendas for Obama: “Let’s be candid—a lot of this will be ignored.” Bob Shrum, senior strategist for John Kerry’s 2004 run, says that unless an idea is “the sort that really stands out,” campaigns tend to keep their own counsel. This is especially true of Obama, who has his own political base and made a point of disengaging with much of the current Washington apparatus during his bid. “There aren’t going to be people parachuted in,” says Hurlburt. “The Obama universe is so large that there could be people to say ‘we need you to just go off and think about the transition.’”

Reading further into the dense literature of transition, it becomes clear that the new paper-pushers are largely the old ones. Lawrence Korb, a veteran of the George H.W. Bush Defense Department, has contributed to the IPS and CAP platforms on defense. Michael Waldman, chief White House speechwriter for Clinton’s second term, has worked on an essay for the *Democracy* offering. Kenneth Duberstein, a Reagan Cabinet official who endorsed Obama for president, has managed the publication of the Brookings transition project. Other Clinton alumni like Laura Tyson, Sandy Berger, Henry Cisneros, and Podesta have penned chapters in the CAP volume. Greg Craig, Clinton’s impeachment lawyer and a key foreign-policy adviser for the Obama campaign, wrote CAP’s State Department offering. It’s not just that Obama learned from the transition mistakes of the Clinton team; the team learned from its own mistakes, and Obama is letting it take the lead in his administration. These fixtures of Democratic government in exile have made a career of finessing policy and advising presidents; though it

cuts somewhat against the presumption that Obama will offer true change, their resurrection is good evidence that the left has finally created its own seamless cycle between think tanks and government—a characteristic of the right it has long envied.

But will Obama actually read—let alone implement—the suggestions of the army of wonks on the left? One organizer maintained that his group would magically woo “the progressive part of Obama,” suggesting they could push benchmarks for climate action from 60 percent emissions reductions by 2050 to 80 percent reductions—which would be dandy, were the latter not already Obama’s stated position. Other non-profits are more measured in their expectations: “We’re not going to solve the Iraq conundrum with a 2,000-word memo to the president, and we’re not going to try,” says Marshall.

Borosage, for his part, sees the agenda-writers as just as important as the agendas themselves. “There’s a situation where the people you’ve assigned to write chapters are logical secretaries or undersecretaries,” he explains.

To be fair, just about everyone—including the former Clinton official with ties to the current transition—acknowledges that Obama will need eyes to peer around corners, and fresh ideas on demand. The think-tankers can’t really be blamed for clamoring to whisper in his ear. Most groups are hoping for one of two outcomes: getting their people in the door of the executive branch or getting their ideas into the new political bloodstream. But to be more effective, the official encourages interest groups to band together—which, on the new left, is a fait accompli. “Having a lot of different books in the Bible to read from is not necessarily bad,” Kirsch concludes, “if they’re all teaching the same lessons.”

Perhaps the most important truth of this political moment remains the near-tantric cool with which Obama won the election. Consider the reams of newsprint that littered Obama’s path to the White House. *The Washington Post* wrote, “Mr. Obama will not ride into town determined to reinvent every policy wheel.” *The Chicago Tribune* opined, “Obama would govern as much more of a pragmatic centrist than many people expect.” Every wonk in town marvels at his famed temperament without thinking that the “new kind of politics” he’s promised could mean that their hard work goes into the shredder.

Hurlburt believes that progressives should expect “more awe and less shock” from their leader. And Obama himself is circumspect about the benefits of the liberal shock doctrine. “I do think the next president’s going to have to come quickly out of the box,” he told a reporter in Boulder, Colorado, in the days before the election. “The first 100 days are going to be important, but it’s probably going to be more like the first 1,000 days that makes a difference.” **TAP**

Dayo Olopade reports on politics, policy, and culture from Washington and is a regular writer at The Root.

THE AMERICAN
PROSPECT
SPECIAL REPORT

OCEANS & COASTS

As resources vanish, is it too late to turn the tide?

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Restoring the Battered Commons

The degradation of coasts and oceans continues, but faint hopes for improvement are stirring.

BY ROGER D. STONE

Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest," writes Garrett Hardin in his famous 1968 essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons." As a principal example, he continues, "maritime nations still respond automatically to the shibboleth of the 'freedom of the seas.' Professing to believe in the 'inexhaustible resources of the oceans,' they bring species after species of fish and whales closer to extinction."

This special report explores the many ways in which, after 40 years, there has been ample reconfirmation of Hardin's gloomy paradigm. Stewardship remains in short supply. Grimmiest of many fishery assessments is the recent forecast that 100 percent of the world's fisheries will be "collapsed" to beneath commercial viability by 2048. Major changes in the temperature and chemistry of our waters caused by greenhouse emissions and climate change are having profound consequences. Ultra-sensitive coral reefs are fast vanishing. Coasts and estuaries are being ever more battered by imprudent shorefront development, toxic and nutrient runoff, and the effects of major storms and tsunamis. "Dead zones" containing little marine life occur with alarming frequency after algae, overfed by excess nutrients washed from farms into coastal waters, blossom, die, and deplete oxygen.

Harmful practices of course continue. This report's authors show how irresponsible forms of aquaculture damage wild fish populations and make life tougher for the fishermen hunting them. Powerful forces oppose the application of sound principles to the relentless

advance of coastal development and pollution. Few involved question the ethics of their activities. While some U.S. states have recently become more progressive in their approach to coast and ocean issues, federal leadership has been sorely lacking. But there are a few breaks in the clouds, with surprising gains in the traditionally abysmal quality of U.S. fishery management, and measures of hope resulting from the ways in which some citizens and political leaders are at last squarely facing up to the need to curb greenhouse emissions.

It is nearly too late for the tide to turn. It will be a long way home. But with a new crowd soon to take the helm in Washington, in a position to set better policies in domestic waters and exercise international leadership as well, this report's authors sense a real if faint opportunity to improve the sad condition of our ocean commons—and stalwartly advance the exceptions to Hardin's dour rule. **TAP**

Roger D. Stone, guest editor for this special report, is director and president of the Sustainable Development Institute and the author of five books on environmental issues.



Plumes of diesel fuel exhaust reflect in the waters of Magdalena Bay, Mexico.

Carbon Dioxide: The Curse of the Deep

Ocean warming, acidification, and corrosion wreak havoc on marine populations.

BY MARAH J. HARDT

I was 8 years old, diving down in the waters off Cape Cod, when I first saw a strange shimmering within the sea. About 7 feet beneath the surface, I cautiously extended my hand to where the water appeared blurry, as if I were gazing down through a thick, melting pane of glass. My fingertips struck very cold water. I had encountered a thermocline, literally a line of temperature, and discovered that the ocean is far from a uniform pool of blue.

Different layers of warm and cold water, some with more minerals, some with fewer, alternately rise and sink, creating currents, distributing nutrients, and forming distinctive habitats. Tem-

perature and chemistry govern ocean life in a way not seen on land. When water warms, it absorbs less oxygen and increases stratification, reducing its ability to mix with waters below. As a result, deeper waters do not receive as much oxygen from the surface, and surface waters do not receive as many nutrients from below. Marine animals have a hard time living in such depleted waters. If we change the temperature or alter the chemistry of the ocean, we change the rules for survival.

Industrialization has done exactly that. Burning fossil fuels releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, which reflects more heat back to the earth. The

oceans absorb much of this excess heat, warming an average .56 degree Fahrenheit to a depth of 1,000 feet over the past 50 years across the globe. Oceans also absorb the carbon dioxide—30 million metric tons every day. But as oceans sponge up our carbon waste, they reduce climate change on land at the expense of the climate and life in the sea.

Life responds to the changing climate by seeking out preferred temperature ranges in which to best grow and reproduce. We see this in butterflies living farther north and in insects hatching earlier than ever before. Beneath the waves it is no different, except that changes are happening exceptionally fast. Tiny shrimp-like animals called copepods are shifting geographic distribution poleward at rates up to 30 times faster than many land species. Marine animals from baby cod to humpback whales dine on copepods, which are the most abundant multicellular animals on earth. When they move, the whole food web tilts. Predators must keep up or go hungry.

As species move into new areas, increased competition for food or intro-

duction of new threats may result. Warmer winter temperatures favor development of a deadly oyster disease that has now spread along the entire eastern seaboard of the United States. Species that do not like warm water move poleward or deeper or both, but many have nowhere else to go. For corals, movement is not an option. How does one relocate the towering walls of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, which took millennia to build?

Increasing oceanic concentrations of carbon dioxide affect wildlife by changing the chemistry of the seawater *around* and the fluids *within* the bodies of marine plants and animals—an effect without parallel on land.

When water mixes with carbon dioxide it becomes more acidic. This alters the rate at which many minerals can form or dissolve. Since industrialization, the surface layer of the ocean has become 30 percent more acidic, a phenomenon known as “ocean acidification.” One consequence is a decrease in free carbonate ions—small molecules (untold billions of them could fit in one teaspoon) that are major building blocks for calcium-carbonate shells and skeletons of organisms such as clams, corals, and microscopic snails called pteropods. These animals provide important food and habitats for thousands of species, from reef fish to salmon.

The more carbon dioxide, the more difficult it is to construct new shells and skeletons. Too much carbon dioxide and seawater becomes corrosive. Calcified hard parts start to dissolve.

Deeper waters become corrosive faster than surface waters because they naturally contain fewer carbonate ions. Deep-living, cold-water corals are particularly at risk. Shallow species, such as tropical corals and pteropods, should not be affected yet. But this summer, strong currents forced corrosive waters all the way to the surface of the ocean off the California coast. Suddenly, surface-dwelling pteropods were in dangerous territory. But that is not the only worry: Reducing calcification could have significant consequences for global climate change because calcification is one way

that oceans sequester carbon dioxide over long periods of time by storing it as calcium carbonate in shells and coral reefs.

Carbon dioxide is a small molecule that easily passes through the skin of aquatic life, accumulating internally and making cells more acidic. While current pH changes are mostly nonfatal, any change requires energy to readjust the internal acid-base balance. This leaves organisms with less energy to spend on growth, reproduction, or maintenance of basic activity levels. In organisms as diverse as fish, squids, worms, and sea stars, everything from immune function to oxygen delivery to cells shows diminished returns with lower pH. Fertilization success and developmental rates are also affected, as has been recently shown with sea urchins. Deep-sea animals are especially at risk: Evolved to live in very stable environments, they have less capacity to adapt to change.

Squeezed between warming waters above and low-oxygen waters below, faced with potential acid-base battles

within and shifting food supplies without, marine life is in a real pickle. We cannot see this when we gaze out to sea. The ocean surface remains a mirrored reflection of sky, belying the enormous changes occurring below its surface. These changes cannot be ignored. Reduced seafood supplies, reduced coastal protection, and reduced climate regulation will negatively affect millions of people around the world. But there are other reasons why we should care. At the International Coral Reef Symposium this summer, Dr. Joan Kleypas, a renowned coral reef scientist, offered this sentiment: The world without corals is like a Van Gogh painting without color. We must act now, as a global community, to stem the tide of rising carbon dioxide and shoulder this burden. No ocean, no matter how mighty, can do it alone. **TAP**

Marah J. Hardt is a research fellow with the Blue Ocean Institute. Her background is in coral reef ecology and the history of science.

Imagining the Oceans in 2025

Entire ecosystems teeter on the brink of extinction as slime and dead zones take over.

BY JEREMY B. C. JACKSON

As recently as the 1950s, very smart people like Rachel Carson and Jacques Cousteau believed the oceans were so vast that fish stocks and the ocean's capacity to absorb human wastes were for all practical purposes unlimited. In reality, though, overfishing and degradation of water quality had long been apparent in places like the North Sea and New England. But no one took the problems seriously until the collapse of the legendarily abundant Newfoundland cod fisheries in 1992. The news has been unrelentingly bad ever since. Unfettered exploitation, pollution, and now climate change have brought entire ocean ecosystems to the brink of extinction, and we are

left scrambling to figure out what to do.

Recent reports by the Pew Ocean Commission and the U. S. Ocean Commission, as well as innumerable National Research Council reports, clearly summarize the causes and consequences of ocean degradation. But they have failed to capture public attention. To do this we need to distill the seemingly endless litany of problems and threats into four basic questions: How and why are the oceans changing for the worse? What will happen to the oceans if degradation is allowed to continue? What can we do to stem the tide?

The answers to the how and why are all too clear. Most fishery species, including tunas, swordfish, and snappers, are fished

An aerial view of coral formations of the Great Barrier Reef, Queensland, Australia

process termed “eutrophication” that I call the Rise of Slime. Many of the species are toxic, as in the infamous red tides. Oxygen is reduced to fatally low levels due to the decomposition of unconsumed plankton, and massive fish kills occur. The number and extent of such coastal “dead zones” globally has increased exponentially from fewer than 100 to more than 400 since the 1960s.

Warming of the oceans due to increased atmospheric carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels threatens all Arctic and Antarctic ecosystems that are being rapidly invaded by warmer-water species. And reef corals are dying en masse due to coral bleaching during increasingly frequent and severe warm spells. Bleaching is

the breakdown in the symbiosis between corals and the microbes that live inside coral tissues and provide their food by photosynthesis. When temperatures rise too high, photosynthesis stops, the corals evict the microbes, rendering their tissues a ghostly white. If the symbiosis is not re-established, the corals eventually die. Increased carbon dioxide is also making the oceans more acidic, so that it is more difficult for animals and plants to make their shells.

Loss of biodiversity is perhaps the ultimate synergistic effect that reduces the resilience of ecosystems to overfishing, pollution, or climate change. The ecological role of the number of species in a community is extremely difficult to evaluate, as opposed to the role of specific predators or competitors. But increasing evidence suggests that more diverse communities are more productive, more difficult to invade by alien species, and recover more quickly from disturbances such as overfishing. We have no idea how many species may have gone extinct in the oceans due to human disturbance, but huge numbers of species are effectively extinct ecologically because their numbers are so reduced they no longer have any significant detectable effect. The rate of such ecological extinction is ever increasing so that resilience will almost certainly decline accordingly.

We can summarize all these changes that have already occurred by classifying entire ecosystems as if they were species by the criteria of the Endangered Species Act. Coral reefs, coastal seas, and estuaries are globally “critically endangered,” with habitat-forming species like corals, oysters, kelps, sea grasses, marsh plants, and mangroves, as well as all large fishes, sharks, turtles, and marine mammals reduced by more than half to more than 99 percent of their former abundance. Continental shelf ecosystems are globally “endangered,” with reductions often as great as coastal seas, and pelagic ecosystems are merely “threatened” because of their remoteness—but perhaps also

to capacity or beyond, and once phenomenally abundant cod, bluefin tuna, and rockfish are severely overfished. Even Alaskan pollock stocks are in serious trouble. Pollock is comparatively well managed and certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council. Yet two of the four stocks are completely shut down, a third is just a fraction of its former size, and now the fourth and largest has declined by half since just last year. Foolish fishing practices, such as targeting spawning aggregations for their roe before the fish can spawn and the destruction of critical fish habitat by trawling, are major problems. But the bottom line, as for global fisheries generally, is that too many people are competing for too few fish, and the economic pressures to keep on fishing have overwhelmed common sense.

Besides overfishing, increased runoff of nitrogen and other nutrients from chemical fertilizers, industrial animal waste, and burning of fossil fuels has led to population explosions of planktonic algae and microbes beyond the capacity of their predators to keep them in check—a

The list of unwelcome changes goes on and on. The biggest problem, however, is that the different forms of human and natural disturbances act synergistically so that the net consequences are much greater than the sums of the different factors acting alone. Synergies are also complex and difficult to anticipate because of historical contingencies and chance, although they make sense in retrospect.

For example, estuaries throughout the world used to be packed with shellfish and other animals that fed on particles in suspension and kept populations of plankton in check. Oysters in the Chesapeake Bay were so abundant that they filtered the equivalent of all the water in the bay every few days. Virtual elimination of oysters by dredging killed the living filter, and water quality began to deteriorate because of agriculture and untreated sewage—even before the massive use of chemical fertilizers exacerbated the problem. Huge increases in nutrient runoff are now the pre-eminent problem. But the question remains whether reduction in nutrients could restore water quality without the restoration of oysters, just as the Great Lakes initially failed to recover from eutrophication after nutrients were decreased.

Loss of biodiversity is perhaps the ultimate synergistic effect that reduces the resilience of ecosystems to overfishing, pollution, or climate change. The ecological role of the number of species in a community is extremely difficult to evaluate, as opposed to the role of specific predators or competitors. But increasing evidence suggests that more diverse communities are more productive, more difficult to invade by alien species, and recover more quickly from disturbances such as overfishing. We have no idea how many species may have gone extinct in the oceans due to human disturbance, but huge numbers of species are effectively extinct ecologically because their numbers are so reduced they no longer have any significant detectable effect. The rate of such ecological extinction is ever increasing so that resilience will almost certainly decline accordingly.

out of ignorance and lack of rigorous baselines for comparison.

Where will all this lead? Predictions are inevitably fraught with uncertainty, but we have sufficient understanding of the basic ecological processes involved to predict what will happen if we continue business as usual. Failure to stop overfishing will push increasing numbers of species to the brink of extinction, while more resistant species—the future rats and cockroaches of the oceans—will take their place. Runoff of nutrients and rising temperatures will increase dead zones to the point that they merge as a continuous band around the continents, and outbreaks of diseases will multiply. Even farmed seafood will be increasingly toxic from increased mercury from the burning of coal unless grown in isolation from the ocean. Increased carbon dioxide emissions will increase ocean temperatures and acidity. Warmer surface waters will inhibit the vertical mixing of the oceans, and bottom waters in the open ocean will become increasingly anoxic as in the Black Sea and the northern Gulf of Mexico.

All these changes are already happening and are routinely measured by oceanographers where I work. Even more frighten-

agement are well established if widely ignored. Whatever we do, wild fisheries cannot possibly sustain increasing global demand so that industrial-scale aquaculture of species low on the food chain is the only viable alternative. Environmentalists have strongly opposed aquaculture because of irresponsible habitat destruction for shrimp farms, introduced species, and emphasis on species high on the food chain like salmon and tuna that require even more fish for food. But aquaculture is the way of the future, and we should focus on more effective regulation rather than on futile opposition. Subsistence overfishing is a vastly greater problem in developing countries where fishing whatever meager catch might be available is commonly a matter of survival. Rationalization of these fisheries will require subsidies to provide alternative sources of protein and employment.

The rise of slime is a vastly greater problem that will require a global revolution in agriculture. The agricultural establishment has made known its conservatism and environmental irresponsibility since its opposition to Rachel Carson's critique of pesticides in *Silent Spring*. This irresponsibility continues in

understand that the rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is due to the burning of fossil fuels and that the climate is warming and the oceans are becoming more acidic accordingly. Even more encouraging is that states like California are taking steps to reduce emissions through mandatory use of clean-energy technologies and conservation. But the challenges are enormous and societal inertia so great that it will be a very long time before emissions level off, much less decrease. Thus, the oceans will become warmer and more acidic for decades to come, and many scientists have already written off coral reefs and any marine creatures whose lives depend on their calcareous skeletons.

But hope for reefs still remains in the commonsense observation that ecosystems that are protected from overfishing and pollution appear to be more resistant to the effects of climate change than those that are not—just the way being fit helps us to survive a catastrophic illness. The ecological mechanisms are obscure and the limits to the benefits of local protection unknown. Nevertheless, local conservation may buy precious time for alternative-energy practices to emerge.

So what will the oceans be like in 2025? It all depends on how rapidly we act. We could make enormous progress by instituting and enforcing more effective fishery regulation with responsible aquaculture to restore marine food webs. We could also reverse the increase in dead zones and outbreaks of disease to make places like the Chesapeake Bay and North Carolina's Pamlico Sound healthy again. The only thing standing in the way is profit at the margins of bad agricultural practice, unregulated waste disposal, and greed. As for warming and acidification, we can only hope that making progress with the rest will make a sufficient difference for a few more decades. At least we still have a choice about what our oceans will be like, a choice we may not have for long. **TAP**

Jeremy B. C. Jackson has studied tropical ecosystems since the 1960s. He is the Ritter Professor of Oceanography at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and senior scientist emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution.

Too many people are competing for too few fish, and the pressures to keep on fishing have overwhelmed common sense.

ing, albeit more poorly understood, is that biogeochemical cycles of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and sulfur will change in still uncertain ways, as they have in the past during the great mass extinctions and revolutions in the history of life.

How can we stop this runaway degradation of the oceans? The driving factors are obvious, and no new scientific research is required to know where to begin. But the implications for the ways we exploit the oceans, grow our food, and use energy for everything we do are vast.

Changes in fisheries should be the easiest to achieve in developed countries because wild fisheries are a dying industry due to diminishing stocks and rising fuel costs, and the tools for effective man-

the unregulated and subsidized overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, unnecessary loss of soils, and lack of treatment of animal wastes that are released into the environment in staggering abundance. The harmful effects on terrestrial ecosystems are also severe. As for fishing, these issues are especially sensitive in developing countries where growing adequate food is a matter of survival. But in developed nations, removing subsidies for fertilizers and pesticides, and taxing their use, would significantly reduce nutrient loading and eutrophication with only modest reductions in production and increases in costs.

The most encouraging news about climate change is that more and more people

Saccage

Learning the lessons of Jacques Cousteau

BY SUSAN SCHIEFELBEIN

One day in the late 1970s, the ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau joined me at a Paris café, pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket, and pushed it across the table. On it, he'd listed two dozen words with tally marks beside each. "The winner is *saccage*," he said.

For weeks, Cousteau had been asking colleagues to help him choose a word that could focus public attention on the environmental threats posed by the mechanical destruction of coastlines and other natural habitats. After all, he reasoned, for centuries the word "pollution" had referred to the abominable sins of desecrating churches and defiling one's self. It was no coincidence, Cousteau thought, that the environmental movement took off just when the word "pollution" entered the popular lexicon as a grim description of poisons poured into air and water. For Cousteau, the French word *saccage*—meaning plunder, pillage, looting—described the sack of the coastlines as vividly as it did the sack of Rome. This became a second key word in his environmental lexicon.

The concept of saccage had not come to Cousteau as a flash of inspiration. In the 1940s, when he invented the Aqua-lung and began making undersea films, he descended daily into a Xanadu profuse with fish, corals, and plant life. As years passed, he found it progressively more difficult to find film locations. Finally, in the late 1970s, he returned to an area of the sea with a towering, craggy rock on the bottom—the kind of habitat around which sea life proliferates—that had once provided his most spectacular footage of colorful creatures and undersea gardens. He now found the waters barren and the bottom covered with a blanket of rot. Given the number of other desolate areas he'd seen, he realized that what a full dozen of

his films had captured no longer existed.

Cousteau estimated that life in the *Mare Nostrum* (the Mediterranean) had diminished by some 40 percent. Blaming pollution, Cousteau obtained scientific assessments of water, sediment, and plankton samples. His measurements showed that toxic poisoning alone could not have caused the diminution of life that he had seen. If that pollution had not taken this toll, then what had? Cousteau pointed toward the Riviera, where beaches, landfills, and dozens of ports had been constructed on stretches that had once been marsh and wetland. Between the Alpes Maritimes and Monaco, more than 1,700 acres of the most fertile strip of shallow waters had been overwhelmed by saccage—buried under dikes, landfills, and inside artificial harbors. He watched as workers sloppily built a landfill to extend a runway at the Nice airport. The structure collapsed, causing a tidal wave that smashed boats and houses, causing millions of dollars in damage. One woman was fatally swept out to sea, and at the airport six men were killed and three more vanished forever.

More than 30 years have passed, and saccage has taken on ever greater dimensions. The effects of global warming may well exact a payment from the sea, specifically regarding the force of severe storms that have recently hit American coastlines. James Elsner, professor of geography at Florida State University, led a team that this September published an elegant study in *Nature* magazine. The team found that global warming appears to increase the violence and deadliness of tropical storms. "Our results are qualitatively consistent with the hypothesis that as the

seas warm, the ocean has more energy to convert to tropical cyclone wind," the researchers wrote. The study showed that as sea surface temperatures have risen, so have the duration and speeds of winds in the strongest tropical cyclones over each ocean basin, with the greatest increases over the north Atlantic. Other scientists have reported that the largest waves in violent storms have grown in height by 20 percent since the late 1970s.

Rising sea levels compound the threats posed by raging winds and waters. As the seas warm, water expands and sea levels rise. Arctic snow and ice melt, more sunlight is absorbed, and the seas grow warm-



Jacques Cousteau in 1986

er and higher still. In the past century, the seas have risen by 4 inches to 10 inches. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that global warming may raise the sea by another 7 inches to 23 inches before the close of this century. Other studies call this a conservative estimate.

Higher seas and more violent storms pose ominous risks for coastal inhabitants. The Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute estimates that coastal storms cause 71 percent of annual U.S. disaster losses and that within 60 years, a full quarter of all structures within 492 feet of the ocean will be destroyed. The rising seas and the fury of storms also increase erosion: In the United States, we are annually losing more than a yard of shore along 60 percent of the Pacific coast and 35 percent of the Atlantic coast.

And what of the future losses, both in economic and human terms? Nearly two-thirds of our human population

resides within 50 miles of a coastline. In just the next 20 years, that portion is expected to increase to three-quarters of all people. The IPCC warns that by 2080, about 100 million people could be threatened each year by floods. In a worst-case scenario, climate change could assault North America alone with a mega-flood every three to four years, instead of at nature's rate of once a century. According to a recent report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the number of human beings threatened by flooding due to climate change could triple by 2070 and property losses could increase to \$35 trillion. According to a 2007 study published by the journal *Environment and Urbanization*, more than 634 million inhabitants of 183 countries live in areas threatened by rising sea levels, defined as those below 33 feet above sea level. Poor nations face the greatest human losses.

Still, we continue to pressure our coastlines. In the United States alone, the coastal population rises by some 3,500 people a day. Wetlands, a first line of defense against storms, are estimated to reduce storm surges from 3 inches to 9 inches for every mile of marsh. Never-

theless, Americans have lost more than half of the wetlands that existed 200 years ago across what is now the Continental United States—a loss exceeding 100 million acres of wetlands as humans dried, plowed, developed, subdivided, logged, and destroyed them by dikes, levees, and logging.

Wetlands have been dried, developed, subdivided, logged—and destroyed.

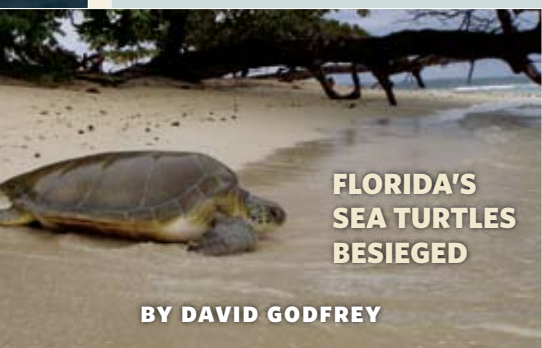
An example: In 1985, Cousteau filmed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers using heavy-handed measures to alter the Mississippi River. In its efforts to shorten the river's path to the Gulf of Mexico by 200 miles, the Corps laid gargantuan sheaths of concrete mats to stabilize the banks, changing the Mississippi, in Cousteau's judgment, from a river to a paved waterway. Even at that time satellite pictures showed the great Louisiana delta shrinking as the river's faster currents no longer dropped their rich silts to extend the land but swept them out and dumped them over the edge of the continental shelf.

Experts say that by now we've lost 20 percent of the vast delta existing a century

ago. This estuary, once 10 times the size of Grand Canyon National Park, had served as New Orleans' great natural defense against hurricane winds and storm surges. After Hurricane Katrina, many New Orleans residents angrily accused the Corps of having destroyed this natural defense. Scientists have since point-

ed as well to the oil industry, which had dredged 10,000 miles of canals throughout the mangroves. Experts believe these service canals, used to tap oil and natural gas, unilaterally caused the loss of some 1,000 square miles of delta—about half the land lost in the past century. Though costs of restoring New Orleans and the delta are estimated to reach \$60 billion, a spokesman for the oil industry called its sackage of the wetlands "insignificant."

We continue, as well, to plunder ocean waters. In deep-sea trawling, fishermen drag heavy equipment across the ocean bottom. Because sea life swarms around craggy rocks, the undersea mountain ranges, called seamounts, are particularly



FLORIDA'S SEA TURTLES BESIEGED

BY DAVID GODFREY

Seven species of sea turtles inhabit the world's oceans. These air-breathing reptiles have survived virtually unchanged for 200 million years. Sea turtles are unique among marine animals because they must return to land to reproduce; they lay their eggs on tropical, sandy shores. These amazing animals have outlived the dinosaurs, yet now they are threatened with extinction due to the actions of humans.

Nowhere are the threats to their survival more evident than on Florida's beaches.

Florida hosts more sea-turtle nesting than anywhere else in the continental United States. The Western Hemisphere's largest colony of loggerhead turtles nests on Florida's coast, along with large numbers of green and leatherback turtles. But Florida's beaches are in trouble—from poorly sited coastal development, sea-wall construction, repetitive beach nourishment, increasingly strong storms, and rising sea levels. Sixty percent of Florida's beaches are eroding, and 46 percent are "critically eroding," meaning upland structures already are under eminent threat. Sea turtles now struggle to find a suitable nesting habitat.

The continued development of Florida's coastline and the engineering tactics used to protect structures from erosion combine to threaten the health of the

beaches that sea turtles need to reproduce. The most widely used erosion-fighting tactics include coastal armoring (sea walls) and repetitive sand-dredging projects to rebuild beaches. Public subsidies, including redevelopment assistance, taxpayer-backed coastal-wind insurance, federal flood insurance, and publicly financed beach-building projects encourage development along even the most erosive beaches. Loopholes in Florida's coastal-building laws allow development to the seaward-most "line of construction," regardless of erosion rates or beach width. A series of regulatory loopholes to accommodate private-property rights even allows homes to be built seaward of the 30-year erosion line—the area coastal regulators anticipate will be underwater before an average mortgage can be retired.

Florida established its coastal regulatory

prolific. Trawlers draw their equipment recklessly along these ranges, crushing corals, dragging boulders, catching targeted profitable fish but also destroying everything else. Even more bewildering is the continued sackage of the shallow coastal waters, down to 65 feet, where sunlight meets phytoplankton and fields of *Posidonia*, grasses in which fish lay their eggs, flourish. These shallow waters, one-half of 1 percent of total ocean space, support 90 percent of all sea life. More than two decades have passed since the OECD warned its members about the economic foolishness of plundering fragile coastal waters and habitats by building breakwaters and sea walls, dredging for sand and gravel, and dumping dredge spoils. Yet the practices continue. In just the 11 years since Cousteau's death, his precious *Posidonia oceanica*, his nursery of the Mediterranean, has become endangered.

Cousteau once related a parable for the sin of sackage. He was describing his experiences in searching for ancient shipwrecks. "On the bottom, the wrecks eventually open up and are covered by mud," he said. "After a few centuries, you can spot them only by seeing the tips of the necks of amphora sticking up above the sands or by a few artifacts scattered around on the bottom." Knowing that exquisite artworks had been found in the early years of the 20th century in an area of the Aegean near Antikythera, Greece, Cousteau and his crew decided on an expedition. They discovered that trawlers had scraped the bottom bald. Nonetheless, they managed to find some treasures. More than 2,000 years ago when the Romans sacked ancient Greece, a departing Roman ship had sunk with a cargo of loot. From the sands of the bottom, one of Cousteau's divers also disengaged a beautifully shaped miniature

bronze arm. From what priceless artifact, Cousteau wondered, had trawlers possibly broken the piece? When he later visited the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, Cousteau spotted a bronze figure that had been found at the Antikythera site in 1901. It was missing a limb. The little arm found by his team fit exactly.

Razed by trawlers, the bottom of the Aegean has been stripped of countless clues it could have provided to the ancient wrecks and artworks it engulfs. Sackage destroys both natural and cultural treasures. How fitting that the plunder, pillage, and looting of Antikythera stands as a metaphor for the global sackage of our past, present, and future. **TAP**

Susan Schiefelbein is co-author, with Jacques Cousteau, of the recently published book The Human, the Orchid, and the Octopus.



Massive sea walls like this one crowd out sea turtles in Florida; left, a green turtle returns from nesting on a natural beach.

program in 1986. It was intended to balance development and private-property rights with the need to protect the coastal system by controlling the location and design of structures. However, nearly half the beachfront homes constructed under the regulatory program now sit on critically eroded beaches. The balance clearly has shifted in favor of risky development at the expense of beach protection.

Florida's sea turtles are being squeezed between rampant shoreline development and increasing coastal erosion. Their long-term survival depends on a com-

prehensive reform of Florida's coastal-management policies. Stronger building setbacks are needed to restrict development adjacent to eroding beaches. Creative policies are needed to promote "strategic relocation" of existing development away from the eroding shore. These strategies could include aggressive land purchasing, transfer of development rights, easements to restrict sea-wall construction, and tax incentives to relocate landward. Public subsidies encouraging high-risk and damaging coastal development should be eliminated or should

include restrictions on repeat claims and prohibitions against building seaward of the 30-year erosion line.

Time is running out to make the sort of policy changes needed to ensure the long-term protection and sustainability of Florida's beaches—for the well-being of sea turtles and people. **TAP**

David Godfrey is executive director of the nonprofit Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC). Based in Gainesville, Florida, CCC is the oldest sea-turtle research and protection group in the world.

The Arctic Ocean in the 21st Century

With warming at a rate double the global average, the region's animal populations struggle to adapt.

BY JAMES J. MCCARTHY

Observations of Earth's climate over the past half-century reveal a global trend in warming temperatures of land surfaces, the lower atmosphere, and the oceans. The Arctic region is warming at a rate that is at least twice that of the global average. This is particularly evident in the central Arctic, two-thirds of which is the Arctic Ocean. In contrast to the Antarctic, which is dominated by a central continent and an enormous mass of ice with an average elevation of 7,500 feet, much of the Arctic is at sea level. The low elevation of the Arctic (and thus the greater sensitivity to surface warming), the effect of open water and bare land absorbing more solar-radiant energy than ice and snow, and the fact that water holds heat more effectively than land all contribute to the sharp difference in warming rates observed for Earth's two polar regions. Arguably no ocean is changing now or is likely to change in the near future as rapidly as the Arctic Ocean.

It is the extensive year-round coverage of sea ice that makes the Arctic Ocean distinct from the Atlantic and all other oceans. The Antarctic Ocean surface waters adjacent to Antarctica freeze and thaw annually, with very little sea ice surviving a summer melt season. The currents and high winds around Antarctica tend to facilitate dispersion and melting of Antarctic sea ice, while Arctic surface currents tend to retain ice from year to year in a central gyre.

The area of Arctic Ocean sea ice is shrinking at an alarming rate. As the Arctic cycles from a winter of total darkness to a summer with 24 hours of light, the extent of sea ice oscillates from a

maximum in March to a minimum in September. From satellite sensor data, which were first available in 1979, we know that for nearly three decades, the summer minimum in sea-ice cover has varied annually, but on average it has shrunk about 1 percent per year. In 2007, however, the area of summer ice declined precipitously by an additional 20 percent. In 2008 a slight uptick in ice area occurred, but the 2008 September ice was thinner than the ice a year earlier, and total ice in the Arctic was the lowest yet recorded. The inventory of summer Arctic sea ice is now only about one-quarter of what it was in 1979. Some climate models project future ice-free summers in the central Arctic within a few decades.

What are the possible implications for the unique Arctic Ocean ecosystem? Without sea ice, the marine productivity of the Arctic would very likely increase but with different microalgae, different crustacea, and different fish. What about the well-known Arctic mammals that have evolved to depend on sea ice? Consider the consequences of a warmer Arctic for three ice-obligate marine mammals.

The ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*), by far the most abundant Arctic seal, feeds on fish and crustacea that live under the ice. This seal has evolved to forage deep within the central Arctic, long distances from open water. It is the only seal that thrives in completely ice-covered waters. Its stout front flippers and long claws are especially effective in creating and maintaining breathing holes, which can be seen all across the central Arctic. This seal creates a birthing den in the snow that drifts

across one of its breathing holes, and in this lair, provides shelter for the pup until it is weaned. In warming regions of the Arctic there are increasing observations of prematurely collapsed dens and presumed higher pup mortality. Moreover, with ice-free summer conditions in the central Arctic, the area where this species can successfully forage will be dramatically reduced to parts of the Arctic archipelagos where winds and currents may still concentrate sea ice in summer.

The walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) feeds primarily on mollusks in bottom sediments at depths up to 260 feet. These gregarious mammals live in large herds, with clusters of dominant bulls and their harems. They spend two-thirds of their lives in water and have evolved to exploit the highly productive ice margin, where high rates of organic-matter deposition nourish the seabed community. As sea ice seasonally retreats from land surrounding the Arctic Ocean, the band of intense ice-edge productivity moves offshore as well, and walrus migrate with it as the ice retreats northward, consuming up to 5 percent of their body weight during spring and summer and using the ice to extend their coastal habitat by hauling-out onto ice floes for occasional rest. After feeding, walrus return to familiar coastal sites or haul-outs.

Walrus live up to 40 years. They have an unusually long, 15-month, gestation period, and calves nurse for up to six months. In a warming Arctic sea, ice retreats earlier in the season and soon is too far from continental-shelf feeding depths to be used effectively for rest after feeding, especially by young animals. During the summer of 2007, the Chukchi Sea, just north of the Bering Strait, was ice-free for 80 days. This resulted in unprecedented congestion in coastal haul-outs, with females and young coming ashore in summer, which is highly unusual. When humans or predators, such as polar bears, disturb walrus when they are on land, their natural response is to rush to safety in the sea. As many as 4,000 young walrus were trampled to death by stampeding adults during the summer of 2007. In recent years, walrus have also been observed to be in poor physical condition,



Female polar bear and cubs, North Pole

and sightings of females separated from their young are increasingly common. For these and other reasons, in 2008 the Center for Biological Diversity (San Francisco) petitioned the Department of the Interior to list the walrus as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act.

The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*), more than any other species, has become the icon of a changing Arctic Ocean. It has evolved to have an absolute dependence upon sea ice for access to its preferred prey, the rotund ringed seal. This unusually specific diet is related to the female polar bear's need to acquire substantial lipid reserves prior to giving birth. After mating, a female will double or triple her weight before early autumn when she goes ashore to create a den in a snowdrift or snow bank. She will not feed again until spring, and her metabolism shifts to conservation mode. Absent food, placental nutrition is abbreviated, and two or three cubs weighing 2 pounds at birth are nourished on lipid-rich milk. The female does not eat, drink, defecate, or urinate but remarkably maintains her bone mass during the denning period of six or more months. She emerges from the den in spring with cubs weighing 20 pounds, and she begins her search for seal. Cubs will stay with their mother for two and a half years, but mortality is as high as 40 percent in the first

year. Polar bears can live up to 30 years.

Already there are signs that pregnant female polar bears in some regions weigh less today than female polar bears did in 1980. These bears are excellent swimmers, covering distances of several miles

Polar bear habitat is declining: In recent summers there have been more sightings of drowned bears far from land and ice.

per day. But if the ice retreats from shore before a female and her new cubs can make it from their den onto the ice, the female will be unable to catch seal to feed her young. In recent summers there have been more sightings of drowned bears far from land and ice. If by mid-century no continuous sea ice exists in the central Arctic Ocean, the habitat of the polar bear will probably be reduced like that of the ringed seal to areas in some of the Arctic archipelagos where winds and currents may still concentrate sea ice in summer.

These observations and others were used as evidence in support of the 2005 petition to the Department of the Interior by the Center for Biological Diversity (San Francisco) to list the polar bear as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. In May 2008, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service ruled, "upon the best available scientific and commercial information, that polar bear habitat—principally sea ice—is declining throughout the species' range, that this decline is expected to continue for the foreseeable future, and that this loss threatens the species throughout all of its range. Therefore, we find that the polar bear is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all of its range."

All oceans are interconnected, and the oceans and the planetary atmosphere are tightly coupled components of Earth's climate. As climate changes due to natural and, increasingly, anthropogenic causes, ocean temperatures, ocean currents, the distributions of species and their productivity, even the organization of marine ecosystems can be expected to change. At the end of the last glacial maximum, 18,000 years ago, sea level was about 420 feet below today's level. The Laurentide ice sheet covered nearly half of North America, and Arctic sea ice extended well south of where

it is today. The ranges of populations of terrestrial and marine organisms were correspondingly different from today's. Fossil evidence from the period of warming following the last glacial maximum tells us that nearly all of these species accommodated changes in sea level, extent of land and ocean ice, and general poleward extension of habitat ranges. After a stable period of several thousand years, habitats are again shifting with our warming climate. Now, however, the rate of change is faster by 10 to 100 times, and for Arctic marine species that absolutely require sea ice, critical habitat may disappear entirely. **TAP**

James J. McCarthy is the Alexander Agassiz Professor of Biological Oceanography at Harvard, and president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Saving the Fish Banks

The U.S. has made improvements in managing its stocks but only compared to the rest of the world.

BY COLIN WOODARD

For once it's a good day at the Portland Fish Exchange in Maine. Two dozen buyers representing fish processors, distributors, and retailers crowd in the auction room, consulting computer monitors and parrying one another's bids for the freshly landed catch laid out on ice in the refrigerated hangar next door.

Remnants of a tropical storm blew into the Gulf of Maine overnight, driving the fleet into port with whatever it had caught. *Harmony*, one of the few big bottom trawlers to have survived New England's fisheries crisis, has disgorged thousands of winter flounder caught in the Nantucket Sound, 180 miles to the south. Now packed in dozens of ice-filled totes, the small flatfish are displayed next to heaps of haddock and a 40-pound codfish brought in by one of a dozen smaller gillnetters, day boats that deploy their stationary gear on banks closer to home.

Fifteen years ago, Maine's fishermen

often filled the 22,000-square-foot display hall wall-to-wall with totes of fish. Today's catch—120,000 pounds—fills about a quarter of the hall, but general manager Bert Jongerden isn't complaining. Ten months ago, the catch was down to 67,500 pounds *a week*—15 percent of its former volume—and some were predicting the fish exchange's demise. Now the 22-year-old exchange—the oldest wholesale fresh-fish auction in the continental United States—appears to have turned a corner.

"We've had a very good summer, and I figure we're good up into December, and we've been able to put some money away for a rainy day and can wait until the first of May when they open up some of the rolling closures," says Jongerden.

Like the Portland Fish Exchange, fisheries in the United States appear to have finally turned the corner, though they've been reduced to a shadow of their former glory. Earlier this year, the number of

fish stocks categorized as overfished by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) dropped to 46, down from 86 in 2002. Several important commercial fish populations, including silver hake off the Middle Atlantic States, Pacific whiting, and red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico, have been rebuilt to what scientists consider a healthy level.

"I've been surprised to see how decisively the United States has been in setting and actually enforcing aggressive recovery targets," said Boris Worm, a prominent marine biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, not known for rosy predictions. "There have been some spectacular recoveries, which are real reasons to be optimistic."

"Nobody's whitewashing the situation, but we're making progress," says Steve Murawski, chief science adviser at NMFS headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. "We're down to a handful of stocks around the country that have been persistent problems, and we know it's crunch time for the process."

Of course, progress is relative, and given the situation of global fisheries, it's not hard for U.S. fisheries to stand out. "It's true that the U.S. looks good, but that's because the record of the other countries is so abysmally low," says Daniel Pauly, director of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre in Vancouver.

It's hard to overstate the crisis.

VIEW FROM THE BOAT

BY PAULA TERREL

My family came to Alaska 40 years ago for a "visit," but, like so many others who now call this place home, we have never left. The state's natural charms wooed us into buying a commercial fishing business in southeast Alaska in Juneau. We joined the family of notoriously independent trollers, catching king and coho salmon with hook and line. We never have had any regrets, despite some very lean years.

In Alaska, the seafood industry is the largest private-sector employer. Alaska's

careful stewardship of salmon is unique: The hallmark of our fishery management is rooted in the Alaska Constitution, requiring the state's resources to be "utilized, developed, and maintained on the sustained yield principle." This means Alaska manages salmon to ensure the long-term future viability of fishing.

Alaskan fishing families are deeply conservationist. Every year we have in-season time or area salmon closures to maintain healthy fish populations. We accept this—admittedly reluctantly—as a necessary conservation measure that protects the wild fish for future generations. Unlike many places, no Alaskan fish stock is subject to overfishing.

The growth of fish farming in the late 1980s alarmed Alaskan fishermen. It was not difficult to foresee the potential risks of fish farming: diseases, pollution, escapes from pens, the overuse of antibiotics and food coloring, compromised water quality, and habitat degradation. When fish farming was proposed, we said not just "no" but "hell no." Our state legislature heard us. In 1990, Alaska took the unprecedented step of banning finfish farming in Alaskan waters.

Despite this prohibition, some of our fears were realized. Escaped Atlantic salmon from British Columbia and Washington state fish farms began to appear in our waters. Atlantic salmon are not native to the Pacific and because they have been

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, a quarter of the world's commercial fish stocks are overexploited or depleted, and about half are fully exploited—meaning fishermen are taking as much as can be reliably replenished by the ecosystem. Ninety percent of the world's large predatory fish have been harvested since 1950, according to a 2003 scientific study in *Nature* co-authored by Worm, who headed a 2006 study by an international team of scientists that predicted that if the current situation continues, the world's commercial wild-caught sea-

food species will have collapsed by 2048.

Having destroyed stocks in their home waters, large, highly subsidized fishing vessels from the European Union, Russia, and China have purchased access to the waters of developing nations, where they displace local fishermen. As a result, West African fish stocks have declined by 50 percent over the last 30 years, and thousands of fishermen have been put out of work. On the high seas, heavily subsidized trawlers are devastating ecosystems scientists have barely begun to understand. As valuable fish become rare, fishermen have moved down the food chain, exchanging predators like tuna and cod for invertebrate scavengers like crabs. "At a global level," says Callum Roberts of the University of York, England, "fisheries are on a road to hell."

The U.S. has been down that road. Decades of ineffective management (by government) and technological innovation (by industry) ruined many important fisheries. Some west coast rockfish populations dropped to less than a tenth of their previous levels, while Atlantic halibut became too rare to target. In the Pacific Northwest, shrinking salmon populations have cost 72,000 jobs and more than half a billion dollars. But if there's a ground zero in this crisis, it's New England, where populations of cod and other bottom-dwelling "groundfish" species collapsed in the early 1990s,

prompting the government to close many of the region's historic fishing grounds.

"The system has been broken for a long time, and putting it back together will be tough," says Elliott Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute in Bellevue, Washington. "It will take discipline, good science, creativity, and, unfortunately, there's going to be more pain."

Consumers have been insulated from the crisis because the U.S. has outsourced the problem: Imports accounted for 79 percent of the national seafood supply between 2000 and 2005, according to the USDA last February. Dr. Murawski of NMFS says this undoubtedly contributes to overfishing elsewhere. Roberts calls this "one of the greatest injustices of the modern era of fishing," noting that developing countries are now bearing the brunt.

New England—home to the nation's oldest and most heavily capitalized fishing communities—is widely regarded as the greatest domestic challenge. Despite more than a decade of fishing restrictions—permanent and rotating closures, stringent catch quotas, and days-at-sea limits—the region is still home to by far the largest number of overfished stocks. Of the 46 populations NMFS regards as overfished, 16 are in New England, including cod, haddock, yellowtail flounder, and other species that were the bedrock of the region's 400-year-old industry.

The restrictions—put into place after



Pollock, Portland Fish Exchange, Maine

COLIN WOODWARD

"introduced," they are considered an invasive species that competes aggressively for habitat and food.

Both we and our fish suffered as a result of the farming. Wild salmon, caught with hook and line out in the open ocean, comes to the market unmarred and with firm flesh. But with the glut of farmed salmon that arrived on the market in the mid-1990s, the price my colleagues and I received for troll-caught king salmon plummeted from \$4 per pound to 65 cents per pound. Permit and boat prices dropped precipitously, causing severe socioeconomic problems; the fabric of the small coastal communities unraveled because commercial, recreational, and subsistence

fishing are major contributors to the local economy and culture. During that time, for us to get a reasonable price for our fish, my husband and I would fish for two days and then drive our boat for an exhausting 24 hours straight to sell our fish locally.

Alaska has mostly recovered from these tough times, and troll-caught salmon is again a top-shelf item commanding a high price. This is only because we spent much time and money marketing our salmon. Sadly, along the way, many of our friends lost their boats and permits because they couldn't make their payments.

We still see Atlantic salmon in our waters, and we haven't forgotten the effects of the farms, even those far away

from us. Now, we also face the promotion of federal legislation authorizing fish farms in federal waters throughout the U.S. As fishermen, my husband and I know this presents serious concerns for coastal communities, the environment, and the fish. Proponents of ocean fish farming regularly say that this industry will provide new jobs. In reality, fishermen lose more jobs than are provided on the farms. To aquaculture supporters, we say, "We don't want to be farmers. We want to fish." **TAP**

Paula Terrel fishes with her husband and works for the Alaska Marine Conservation Council to oppose offshore aquaculture legislation.

an environmental group, the Conservation Law Foundation, successfully sued the federal government in 1991 to protect the fish—have had results. Several damaged stocks have been rebuilt—including Georges Bank haddock and scallops—and others are recovering, including red fish and summer flounder.

But some in the industry wonder if any fishermen will be left when the stocks recover. Many have been driven out of business by the restrictions and, increasingly, the cost of fuel, while the piers, processing plants, and other infrastructure they depend on are being pushed aside to make way for condominiums, marinas, and waterfront hotels. A generation ago, Maine was home to over 300 groundfishing vessels; now fewer than 80 remain. “At this point, there’s hardly any fishermen left,” says Jongerden of the Portland Fish Exchange. “No young guys are getting in. The average age of fishermen now is 55 to 60, and two out of three fishermen I talk to say if the government were to offer to buy them out, they’d be gone in a heartbeat.”

Fishing is central to the identity, culture, and economy of dozens of New England communities from Block Island, Rhode Island, to Eastport, Maine. Ted Ames, a fisherman-turned-scholar and

drawing on their fine-grained knowledge of local ecological factors. And, as it would apply only to nearshore waters, it would foster the use of smaller, less powerful vessels and gear technologies that Ames argues are best-suited to working with and adapting to the local ecosystem.

It’s a variation on what scientists call “ecosystem-based management,” a new regime in which managers break with their fragmented stock-by-stock and issue-by-issue approach and look to assessing and protecting the overall ecosystem. The goal: figure out how to manage all of our activities on the ocean so that we don’t do severe damage to biodiversity, critical habitats, and overall ecosystem function.

How to do this remains an open question, but there’s broad consensus that zoning the ocean will play a major role. When applied to fisheries, the approach—endorsed by the World Bank, President Bush’s U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, and the Pew Oceans

Innovative holistic approaches have begun to turn the tide, but U.S. fisheries remain a shadow of their former glory.

2005 MacArthur Fellow, believes conservation would be best served by giving fishermen a role in management of local waters. “We’re proposing the creation of smaller-scale governance that allows fishermen and managers to address the problem locally,” says Ames.

The plan, which Ames wants to try in eastern Maine, is for state and federal authorities to continue setting recovery targets but to let local fishermen work out the details for—and have sole access to—their immediate area. This system—modeled after the state’s successful lobster-management regime—gives fishermen an incentive to improve the ecological productivity of their home territory, while

Commission—would establish some areas where no fishing would take place and many others where fishing is restricted to certain seasons, gear-types, or species, depending on local ecological conditions.

“We can’t continue to let the fishing industry have sway over the entire seabed and allow them to make any decision about where they want to put down their gear at any time,” says Roberts.

Managing an area, rather than a species, may be the only way to detect and respond to the unexpected consequences of human activity. On the eastern seaboard, commercial and recreational fishermen have sharply reduced the population of large sharks. But while



Commercial fishing trawler, Portland, Maine

the shark problem soon became clear to conventional fishery managers, they completely missed the knock-on effects, which included the decimation of North Carolina bay scallops, Chesapeake oysters, and other shellfish. With fewer large sharks around, the numbers of skates, rays, and small sharks that were once their prey exploded. Unfortunately, these species eat shellfish and soon consumed nearly all the adult scallops in the sounds of southern North Carolina, forcing the closure of those fisheries.

“Ecologists throughout the world have argued consistently that management needs to have a more holistic approach or it will destroy the fisheries it is taking care of,” says Ames. “One of the great puzzles to me is why management doesn’t seem to ever tune in to this.”

Indeed, NMFS remains primarily focused on ending overfishing ahead of a legally binding 2011 deadline, a task made more daunting by recent budget cuts. “Getting overfishing under control is our primary goal,” says Murawski.

What is encouraging is that when overfishing is stopped, fish populations usually do recover, sometimes with surprising

speed. "What we've got to do is give nature the space to make the recovery," says Roberts, who has been encouraged by U.S. management, including the creation of a massive marine reserve in the northwest Hawaiian Islands in 2006. "The ecosystems won't necessarily look the way they did 200 or 500 years ago, but they cer-

tainly will be able to recover to a more diverse and healthy state that will help support human life on this planet." **TAP**

Colin Woodard is an award-winning journalist and author of Ocean's End: Travels Through Endangered Seas and The Lobster Coast.

Marine Biodiversity in Jeopardy

The attrition of the world's coral reefs signals far broader and graver problems.

BY NANCY KNOWLTON

News about ocean ecosystems is almost without exception grim. Collapsing fisheries, expanding dead zones, and the prospect of ever warmer and more acidic seas makes optimism a tough sell. When sounding the alarm bells, marine conservation scientists have focused primarily on the loss of "ecosystem services"—things like food, shoreline protection, and tourist-attracting seascapes—that translate into direct economic benefits for humankind. The fate of the basic building blocks of marine ecosystems, namely the many species that together make up the assemblages that provide those services, is far less often discussed.

This stands in contrast to the land, where worries about a sixth mass extinction associated with habitat destruction often underpin conservation concerns. To the public, mass extinction conjures up the demise of the dinosaurs due to a killer asteroid, but past cataclysms can be seen just as clearly in the records of marine species of clams, corals, crinoids, coccolithophores, and the like. These organisms may not grip the imagination like *Tyrannosaurus rex*, but their fossils tell us that things can go dreadfully wrong in the sea, with many once-dominant creatures vanishing in a geological instant. Scientists who study mass extinctions may disagree about causes in some cases, but they agree that such an event is not

something we want to initiate. In the most extreme case, the mass extinction that occurred at the end of the Permian Age about 250 million years ago, over 90 percent of all marine species went extinct. A repetition of an extinction event even remotely approaching this level would have consequences for humans that are so grave they defy imagination.

Why have marine conservation scientists focused so little of their attention on extinction? In part, this stems from earlier assumptions that marine species are more resilient than their terrestrial counterparts, thanks to their geographically broad distributions. We now know, however, that many marine species are much less widespread than we once imagined, as genetic studies have revealed sharp breaks between otherwise similar organisms living in slightly different habitats or on opposite sides of ocean basins. Thus, the potential of marine species to escape extinction by being in many places has probably been exaggerated. Nevertheless, it has been hard to imagine that humans could cause massive marine extinctions because of the vastness of the ocean, its inherent ability to buffer change, and the fact that people cannot populate its surface.

Indeed, the number of marine species known to have gone extinct globally is relatively small, in one analysis just 21. Some of these were spectacular large organisms, such as Steller's sea cow, the

Caribbean monk seal, and the great auk, whereas others, such as most of the fishes, invertebrates, and seaweeds on the list, are known primarily to specialists. Interestingly, many of them went extinct not recently but before the first half of the last century. Not surprisingly, hunting was often the culprit.

Of course, the numbers of extinct species could soon grow, and grow exponentially. Catastrophic declines associated with fisheries have brought some species to the brink of extinction, either directly as targets or indirectly as bycatch. Leatherback turtles, the vaquita porpoise, and the white abalone are a few examples where only heroic efforts will suffice. It is worth noting that we do not have to directly kill every single member of a species to cause the species' extinction; rather, once a critical minimum population size is reached, the ability of the species to successfully reproduce can be lost, and its numbers inexorably decline. Marine species are also often difficult to breed. The vaquita, for example, are so shy that the only good photographs we have of them were taken after the porpoises were killed by drowning in fishers' nets.

Even more worrying is the prospect of mass extinctions through wholesale degradation of marine environments, something once unimaginable but now all too real a prospect. So many people live on or near the coast that almost all shallow waters have suffered, and even if some healthy habitat remains, extinctions can occur because the amount of suitable habitat available determines the number of species that can survive. Thus, some of the species that are still with us may in fact be doomed, a concept known as the extinction debt, which looms over the biosphere much as financial debt looms over the global economy.

If humans affected only the shallow waters fringing our coastlines, that would be bad enough. But thanks to greenhouse gas emissions, even the open oceans have seen and will continue to see increases in temperature and acidity. Both are bad because species often have rather narrow physiological limits, and the two changes together represent a kind of double jeopardy (triple jeopardy when you add in

the fact that industrial fishing fleets go nearly everywhere and have stripped the oceans of most of its top predators). Often lost in the debate on climate change is the fact that carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for at least a century; even if we reform our ways instantly, extinctions are still likely to occur. Failure to take substantive action soon will bring large changes to the fundamental physical and chemical state of our oceans, something once thought impossible, and make the lessons of past mass extinctions increasingly and scarily relevant.

For these reasons, marine scientists no longer just talk about lost goods and services but also discuss permanent losses in the biological diversity of the planet, which we humans call Earth but whose surface is mostly ocean. Coral reef scientists have been among the first to raise the warnings, because they study the most diverse and arguably the most threatened of all marine ecosystems. Reefs today take up an area smaller than the size of Texas, and yet they house about one-quarter of all the species of the sea. Overfishing, pollution, invasive species, warming-caused bleaching, disease, and acidification (think coral osteoporosis) have combined in perfect storm-like fashion to decimate reefs around the world. Living coral has declined by 80 percent in places like the Caribbean, and a recent study suggests that one-third of all corals are at risk of extinction. This is a level even higher than that estimated for frogs, once considered the most vulnerable of all life forms. Unlike frogs, however, corals create the three-dimensional structures, visible even from space, that shelter somewhere between 1 million and 9 million species. Reefs are indeed the canary in the oceanic coal mine, a canary that has passed out on the floor of its cage. Miners of the past paid close attention to their canaries, and so should we. **TAP**

Nancy Knowlton holds the Sant Chair for Marine Science at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. A specialist on coral reefs, she was the founding director of the Center for Marine Biodiversity and Conservation at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Ocean Fish Farms and Public-Resource Privatization

Industrial aquaculture poses new threats to U.S. waters and fishermen.

BY **MARIANNE CUFONE**

The U.S. government has a pattern of allowing big businesses exclusive use of common properties for individual profits. Frequently, this occurs regardless of whether such projects help or harm the general public. Public resources are increasingly being treated like private property—and our oceans are no exception. Quota programs allocate “shares” of fish to only a handful of fishing businesses, and oil companies’ rigs overwhelm parts of the Gulf of Mexico and California coast, causing pollution on nearby beaches and ruining vistas. Now ocean fish farming is at the forefront of debates over equitable use of public ocean resources.

Ocean fish farming, also known as offshore aquaculture or open-water aquaculture, is the mass production of fish in large floating pens or cages in ocean waters. The fish-farming concept is not new. Five thousand years ago, Chinese villagers trapped carp in artificial lakes that formed when flooded rivers receded. Around 600 A.D., the Menhune of Hawaii built a huge fish pond on Kauai, as the legend goes, by erecting a 900-foot-long wall out of lava rock overnight. Today, similar practices occur in near-shore or onshore operations in Thailand, Japan, China, and elsewhere worldwide.

Commercial-scale offshore aquaculture, however, is relatively new for the U.S. Fully envisioning the magnitude of such a business can therefore be challenging. Picture a massive industrial chicken farm, in the ocean—many fish, in cramped quarters, eating, excreting, and growing. Facilities typically include multiple large fish enclosures—one popular cage is about twice the size of an

Olympic swimming pool—crammed with thousands of fish for voluminous and rapid production. These pens can be partially or fully submerged and are often anchored to the sea floor. Just one “farm” is a large-scale operation. In recent years, various U.S. government entities, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), both tasked with conservation and management of natural ocean resources, have openly stated that they intend to support the creation of a program to allow ocean fish farms off coasts all around the country, through national legislation or administrative agency regulations.

While legal mechanisms are available to allow experimental ocean fish farms in U.S. waters, currently, no law specifically authorizes a comprehensive means for long-term, commercial-scale operations. The fragmented U.S. approach to oceans management, with assorted agencies having primary jurisdiction over various pieces of our oceans—for example, the Environmental Protection Agency on pollution and the Minerals Management Service over outer continental-shelf benthic resources (such as oil and gas and extraction facilities like rigs and pipelines)—would require multiple permits from many agencies before an ocean farm could exist. Most of these agencies also do not have specific standards for managing ocean fish farms; such an industry was not yet contemplated at the time many federal laws were passed. Using existing laws to govern ocean fish farms would be like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.



Feeding skiffs at
salmon-farming pens, Norway

Worse than not fulfilling the promise of providing new jobs, U.S. ocean fish farms are likely to outcompete and ultimately replace traditional fishing, causing widespread job losses. This happens due to simple market forces: Industrial farming can regularly produce tons of fish. Flooding the market with these fish can cause prices to drop. Also, companies can usually charge less for farmed fish, because artificial mass production is less costly and less time intensive than traditional fishing. Usually, fishermen cannot compete with lower fish prices, especially now with sky-high rates for the fuel necessary to run fishing boats. As the number of fishermen dwindles, support businesses, like marine supply stores and dock facilities, will also suffer, risking more job loss and hurting economies of coastal communities.

less food in the wild and disrupts ecosystem balance.

Fish farms are unlikely to eliminate our seafood deficit. Currently, the U.S. exports about 71 percent of its domestic fish production, including tilapia, tuna, salmon, crab, and some shrimp. Ironically, these are among the six top seafood imports. The U.S. sends abroad the fish it produces in order to fetch a higher price, and serves cheaper, often industrially produced, lower-quality, imported fish in domestic restaurants and markets. Likely, this will not change dramatically with the coming of U.S. ocean fish farms. The industry is intended for profit—fish farmed in U.S. waters will therefore probably be sent elsewhere for bigger dollar returns—likely leaving the U.S. with just the environmental and economic consequences.

Fish farms can be dirty, pollute the environment, and infect wildlife. Because ocean fish farms allow free flow of water between the cages and the ocean, concentrated amounts of fish food, wastes, diseases, and any chemicals or antibiotics that may be used in farms can flow straight into ocean waters. A report about one ocean-farming facility affiliated with the University of Hawaii said the farm “grossly polluted” the seafloor

Proponents of ocean fish farms—mostly aquaculture entrepreneurs and federal agencies—insist that such an industry in the U.S. will benefit the public by providing new jobs, reducing fishing of depleted wild fish populations, and lessening U.S. dependence on imported seafood products. However, programs are often designed so the corporations owning the facilities will mainly benefit. In fact, a compelling case can be made that ocean fish farming could actually hurt the U.S. at this time:

Fish farms are likely to reduce jobs, causing economic problems for coastal communities. In the 1990s, the fish-farming industry in British Columbia tripled but added no new jobs. In Scotland and Norway, the salmon-farming industry dramatically expanded production, but employment decreased due to increased mechanization.

U.S. fish farms are likely to outcompete and ultimately replace traditional fishing, causing widespread job losses.

Farming fish could increase the take of wild fish and disrupt ecosystems. Most fish for ocean farming are carnivorous and will eat feed containing other fish. Already, significant amounts of wild prey fish are removed from ocean waters—about 23 million to 33 million tons annually worldwide were used for feed in recent years. Ocean farms in U.S. waters will need fish for use as protein in feed. Efficiency will likely dictate that the fish for feed in domestic ocean farms come from nearby waters—increasing the take of local wild fish. Often, fish used in feed are the same that other wild fish and marine birds eat. This leaves

and “severely depressed” sea life. In Norway and British Columbia, numerous problems have occurred with parasites spreading from caged farmed salmon to wild salmon.

All these issues beg the question: Why does the U.S. government continue to pursue initiating a commercial-scale ocean fish-farming program when it could cause so many domestic problems? The basic rhetoric regarding jobs, protecting wild fish, and reducing a seafood deficit is easily rebutted, and therefore, there has been no meaningful answer. Rather, agency representatives and ocean-farming entrepreneurs sim-

ply repeat over and over that developing an ocean fish-farming industry is a top U.S. priority that will benefit the nation, without being able to conclusively prove such statements.

Fortunately, despite the administration's enthusiastic support for ocean fish farms, Congress has not established a national offshore aquaculture program. Bills introduced in 2005 and 2007 were challenged by commercial and recreational fishing groups, conservation and consumer organizations, scientists, and many others as being, among other things, reckless and lacking sufficient safeguards to protect the marine environment and the economies of coastal communities. After Congress held hearings on each bill, they fizzled.

Without congressional action, administration focus has shifted to back-up avenues for permitting a U.S. ocean-farming industry. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, a regional advisory body that helps NOAA make fishing regulations, is developing an ocean fish-farming plan. The plan has been moving steadily toward completion, ushered along mostly by NOAA staff and existing and would-be aquaculturists who sit on the council. The very people poised to benefit from the industry are creating it. The council is scheduled to approve its ocean fish-farming plan in early 2009.

Simultaneously, the Minerals Management Service (MMS), the agency that regulates energy resources, was moving on rules that would permit oil rigs and other ocean energy structures to be used as sites for fish farms. This could allow energy companies to greatly delay and possibly avoid the enormous expenses for removal of old facilities. MMS has no experience with aquaculture and no power to comprehensively, and thus effectively, regulate a new big industry. While MMS has shown no concern about its inabilities, Congress has—a letter from the House Natural Resources Committee opposing the rule, followed by a House bill on Sept. 25, 2008, from Rep. Don Young of Alaska prohibiting the rule, might put the brakes on this endeavor. If not, this plan is scheduled for finalization by MMS in the near

future, possibly by the end of 2008.

For now, the potential for a large-scale ocean resources giveaway has been avoided. Collective pressure has been successful at preventing fish farms from taking over federal waters. Though our ocean resources have often seemed slated for misuse, supported by a big business-centric administration, vigilant public monitoring and action can and should

ensure that common properties remain precisely that and are applied to benefit all, rather than a few. **TAP**

Marianne Cufone is an environmental attorney from Florida and the director of the Fish Program at Food and Water Watch, a national consumer-advocacy organization headquartered in Washington, D.C.

A Call for Ocean-Policy Reform

The time is now for government to respond to long-standing demands for action.

BY SARAH CHASIS

Growing up in New York City, I enjoyed going to Jones Beach on a hot summer day with my family, spending the day swimming in the ocean, and then having dinner at Lundy's seafood restaurant on our way home. At that time, my parents didn't have to worry about the ocean water we swam in being polluted or the seafood we ate being contaminated or the last of a dying breed. But things have changed dramatically since then. Scientists tell us that the oceans are in a state of silent collapse and that we need to act now or it will be much harder and more expensive to fix later.

Oceans cover more than 70 percent of the earth's surface and provide us with food, oxygen, and medicines. They help regulate our climate, and they provide recreational opportunities, jobs, and a unique way of life for residents and visitors of coastal communities. The United States has the largest ocean area under its jurisdiction of any country—an area larger than the entire U.S. land mass.

For most of our history, the resources of the sea were thought to be infinite. Yet over the last decade, we have seen one study after another reveal a very different story: 75 percent of the world's ocean fisheries have been pushed to or past the limits of sustainability; 90 percent of large ocean fish—swordfish, mar-

lin, tunas, and cod—are already gone from the world's oceans; each year, we are warned by the government to limit our consumption of many popular fish because of mercury or PCB contamination; and during the swimming season, we are often cautioned not to swim in the ocean because of bacteria or other disease-causing pathogens in the water. There are increasing numbers of dead zones—areas largely devoid of marine life—and harmful red and brown tides popping up all along our coasts. The buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is raising ocean temperatures and making the oceans more acidic.

Of the many causes of this decline, summarized elsewhere in this report, a principal one is the lack of a coherent governance regime for the oceans. We have a myriad of laws, agencies, and levels of government that affect the ocean but little coordination among them and no unifying vision or governing policy. The recent lifting of the 27-year-old moratorium on drilling off the east and west coasts combined with the increasing number of proposals for liquefied natural gas terminals in the ocean, aquaculture facilities, and renewable-energy projects underscore the urgent need to reform and strengthen U.S. ocean policy.

Several years ago, in response to



The Palmyra Atoll, situated about 1,000 miles south of Hawaii, is a National Wildlife Refuge established by The Nature Conservancy in 2000.

the growing concern about the serious decline of the oceans, two national commissions, the independent Pew Oceans Commission and the congressionally established U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, conducted comprehensive reviews of U.S. ocean policy. Each commission spent approximately three years doing in-depth research and analysis and holding public hearings and meetings around the country. The Pew Oceans Commission included public officials, academics, leaders of fishing groups and environmental organizations and was chaired by Leon E. Panetta, a former member of Congress, who had served as director of the Office of Management and Budget and then as chief of staff to President Clinton. The U.S. commissioners were appointed by President Bush, with congressional input, and were drawn from academia, industry, the military, and public life. The U.S. commission was chaired by retired Adm. James D. Watkins, a former chief of naval operations during the Reagan administration and secretary of energy during the George H.W. Bush administration.

Despite their very different compositions, both commissions reached surprisingly similar conclusions. They found that the oceans were in serious decline and that a major overhaul of U.S. ocean policy was needed to reverse the decline.

The fundamental conclusion of the Pew Oceans Commission was that the econom-

ic sustainability of the ocean depends on its ecological sustainability. The commission recommended that national ocean policy be realigned to reflect and apply principles of ecosystem health and integrity, sustainability, and precaution. The

We have wildlife refuges, national parks, and wilderness areas on land. We need a similar protective system for the oceans.

commission also said we must redefine our relationship with the ocean to reflect an understanding of the strong connection between the land and the sea.

To embrace these reforms, the Pew Oceans Commission recommended that the nation take five priority actions:

- adopt a national ocean policy based on protecting ocean ecosystem health and requiring sustainable use of ocean resources;
- encourage comprehensive and coordinated governance of ocean resources;
- restructure fishery-management institutions and reorient fishery policy to protect and sustain ecosystems on which fisheries depend;
- control sources of pollution, particularly nutrients, that are harming marine ecosystems; and
- protect important habitat and manage coastal development to mini-

mize habitat damage and water quality impairment.

The U.S. commission agreed that existing management approaches should be updated to reflect new scientific findings that demonstrate the complexity and interconnectedness of natural systems. It identified a number of “critical actions” including: improved governance to address the current confusing array of agencies with conflicting mandates; *doubling* the nation’s investment in ocean research; implementing an Integrated Ocean Observing System; strengthening coastal and watershed management; reforming fishery management; acceding to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; and establishing an Ocean Policy Trust Fund dedicated to supporting improved ocean and coastal management at the federal and state levels.

Despite the call for urgent action, the pace of implementation of the two commission recommendations has been frustratingly slow, as reflected in the overall grade of C given in the oceans’

“report card” issued in 2008 by the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative (JOICI), an initiative led by Panetta and Watkins to promote implementation of the two commission reports. The effort to improve the way we govern our oceans at the national level received a D, international leadership by the U.S. on ocean issues received a C+, and the effort to obtain new, much-needed funding for ocean programs received a D+.

The picture is not all grim, though. Important steps have been taken. One is the passage of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act of 2006, which set a firm deadline for ending overfishing. Some marine protected areas, such as in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands, have been established. Despite and perhaps because of the overall lack of progress at the national level, there has been

a fair amount of action at the state and regional levels. Benchmark ocean legislation has been passed in California, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey. West Coast governors have entered into an agreement that lays out an action agenda to strengthen ocean management for their region. These and other state and regional efforts earned an A- in JOCI's report card. "Because states and regions have done much of the groundwork for ocean and coastal protection on the local level, the building blocks are in place," observed Panetta. "But they can only go so far without federal collaboration and support."

Why the lack of progress at the national level? The reasons include too few ocean champions on the Hill, the lack of strong administration leadership, tight budget times, and a lack of public awareness. We face a real challenge in conveying the seriousness of the problems when people cannot see what's going on under the waves. Often, divers, snorkelers, boaters, and fishermen are the ones who use and enjoy the ocean, see what's happening, and are the most concerned. But the decline of the oceans affects all of us.

With the advent of a new president and a new Congress, we have the opportunity to make real progress in implementing a national oceans agenda that builds on the recommendations of the

two national ocean commissions. First and foremost, we need to reform the way we manage our oceans in order to deal effectively with the myriad threats they face. To that end, the president, through an executive order, or Congress, through legislation, should establish a national ocean policy to protect, maintain, and restore the health of our ocean ecosystems. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (the nation's top civilian ocean agency) should also be strengthened so it can provide effective leadership in implementing such a policy. Leadership is also needed in the Executive Office of the President on these issues to ensure that federal agencies are acting in a coordinated manner.

Among other top priorities are ending overfishing of our nation's ocean fish populations by 2011, as required by federal law, and ensuring the prompt rebuilding of depleted fish populations to healthy levels. The president also should establish a scientifically based, national network of marine protected areas where ocean life can rebound and flourish. We have wildlife refuges, national parks, and wilderness areas on land. We need a similar system of protected areas in the ocean. The president and Congress should fund research to better assess the effects on the oceans of global warming and the buildup of atmospheric carbon dioxide and

make sure that any climate change legislation or strategy takes proper account of ocean impacts and makes improved resilience of ocean systems a goal of any climate-adaptation strategy. Support of state ocean protection initiatives and of the state/federal ocean partnerships that are now emerging should be a priority.

Finally, international leadership on ocean issues is essential. The president should support and the Senate should take quick action to accede to the United Nations Law of the Sea Treaty, which establishes the basic rules of international ocean management. But leadership should not stop there. The U.S. needs to be a leader in protecting vulnerable marine areas from the adverse impacts



Blue crab harvest, Chesapeake Bay

THINKING BIG, VALUING THE PRICELESS

BY TUNDI AGARDY

What ails the oceans is not solely the consequence of the race to fish. Nor is it the catastrophic effects of oil spills and ocean dumping. Nor is it the habitat loss associated with coastal development and sprawl. It is all of these things and more—the oceans are dying the death of a thousand cuts.

Why does the world stand by while the seas, covering three-quarters of the earth's surface and containing the bulk of the earth's biodiversity, decline and degrade? It is because we do not adequately value

the ocean for all the goods and services it provides us and do not appreciate the extent to which those ecosystem services are lost by what we do on land as well as by what we do in the sea. We have substantial knowledge about what areas are the most important to protect. We have well-developed tools to do something about it. But we have been horribly timid about applying our knowledge and tools.

To be truly effective in facing down insidious and persistent threats to our seas and coasts, we need to think big. Part of thinking big means considering the strong interconnections between land and sea, as mediated by freshwater. To manage oceans better, we need to look landward and manage watersheds. A strategic

response is also based on recognizing the importance of marine ecosystem services (valuing the priceless) in order to generate the political will to prevent their continued loss. It will mean people working together—across regions, across sectors, and across disciplines.

Coupling government-mediated actions with market-based initiatives is one way to think and act big. Public/private partnerships are key. Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) markets offer incentives to individuals, communities, and institutions to protect ecosystems that provide goods and services such as flood control, water purification, and nutrient cycling.

of destructive fishing practices like bottom trawling and in the establishment of a regime to establish marine protected areas on the high seas—the area beyond any one nation’s jurisdiction.

In short, if we are to have clean beaches, healthy and abundant seafood, and oceans teeming with wildlife for our children and grandchildren to use and enjoy, our next president and Congress must act decisively. Not one but two national commissions have laid out the roadmap for what must be done. The president and Congress now need to implement it. **TAP**

Sarah Chasis is a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council and director of its Ocean Initiative.



Water-quality trading or wetlands banking schemes could compensate agrarian stakeholders for protecting the riparian ecosystems that maintain water quality. Farmers benefit from cleaner water and also from selling PES credits. Those with vested interests in clean water would buy these credits. So would industries that cannot or refuse to mitigate their impact on the freshwater ecosystem. Those that benefit from the services—fishers, tourism operators, water-utilizing industries, communities that live downstream—can be expected to pay for them.

The Chesapeake Bay, the country’s largest estuary and an invaluable ecosystem

Toward a Sea Ethic

Expanding our idea of community is a first step to restoring the seas around us.

BY CARL SAFINA

A couple of years ago I was participating as a writing coach in a Sea Education Association “seamester,” sailing 1,000 miles from Hawaii to Palmyra Atoll, while students from Stanford University received lectures and closely supervised instruction and conducted independent projects on high-tech oceanography. These were smart kids, and the professors were superb. Five hundred miles from land, we got into a discussion on whether the ocean is a “wilderness.” The consensus: Obviously it is; there was no sign of humanity, not another boat in sight. Everyone savored the thought: wilderness!

But, I reminded everyone, we haven’t caught a single tuna or seen a marlin or a turtle. Wilderness? I don’t think so. If the Midwest were covered with water, you wouldn’t see that the buffalo were gone, either. There is no ocean wilderness. The whole ocean feels our effects, through fishing, pollution, dying reefs,

altered pH, immortal plastics, oxygen-asphyxiated dead-zones, warming water, and melting ice.

The students were bummed, as they would put it. I’d spoiled the special aura. Most chose simply to cling to the wilderness idea. After all, they didn’t see any cars or shopping malls, just our beautiful sailing laboratory, our home afloat, our own wind-driven island with all the life support that was keeping us healthy and happy and moving forward.

Exactly, I told them. Now, realize this sailboat is also a metaphor for our whole planet. Why do we take such good care of these decks, all the equipment and gear? Why do we keep an eye on our food supply? Because we realize we’re utterly dependent on this ship. Same with the whole ocean and the whole world.

People can more easily see, and better sense, what’s happening on land. We do see that the buffalo have been banished, that the passenger pigeon—

that supports much ocean diversity and productivity, is a fine place to try out such ideas. Despite many decades of interest in improving the condition of the bay, it continues to decline in health. Groups like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation have raised awareness and put out small fires, but the inescapable reality is that the general trend in the bay’s condition remains downward. Emerging PES markets have a solid chance to turn things around.

In order for systems like this to work at the scale needed to create a turnaround in the bay’s condition, leadership is required. The separate efforts of citizen organizations, local communities, state environmental-management authorities, and the business community are all cru-

cial. But the whole will never be greater than the parts without strategic guidance from an entity that does not yet exist: a regional authority with real power and real ability to provide incentives. The federal government has a responsibility to provide that leadership—a responsibility it has so far shirked.

Big-picture, government-led efforts, involving markets and civil society, could prove to be the last salvation for our precious downstream and offshore ecosystems. **TAP**

Tundi Agardy, an editor and filmmaker, is founder and director of Sound Seas, which promotes marine conservation through science and sociology.

once the most abundant bird in North America—is a memory.

Even scientists who should have known better long assumed that the ocean's creatures were immune to extinction. It's true that the ocean's size, and the fact that people can't live in it or pave its surface, has slowed extinctions. But even the vastness is illusory. First, the ocean isn't just a big bathtub. It's a mosaic of different habitats. Within those habitats, different creatures inhabit different fractions of each piece of the mosaic. (As Nancy Knowlton informs us, tropical coral reefs occupy an area smaller than Texas, and yet they house about one-quarter of all the species of the sea.) This makes many marine species vulnerable to depletion, including some of the ocean's larger animals. Even recovering populations of large whales remain at low numbers compared to earlier times. Many fishes of real, ongoing commercial value have declined, on average, about 90 percent worldwide compared to 1950 levels.

Very few fisheries have actually turned the corner toward recovery. They are mainly in the U.S. where the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 established quantitative triggers for deeming fish depleted, and mandated that formal plans must be created for allowing depleted species to recover within 10 years. Implementation of this excellent law has been spotty and subject to some unfortunate legal interpretations. But overall it makes the U.S., though far from perfect, arguably the best of a bad lot. "That's because the record of the other countries is so abysmally low," says University of British Columbia's Daniel Pauly. Many depleted ocean creatures—from Pacific leatherback turtles (sought for eggs and meat, or killed accidentally in fishing gear) to white abalones to west Atlantic bluefin tuna—may soon end up in the "extinct" column unless we reverse current trends.

The question of extinction aside, the depletion devastates human interests. In the long term, depletion will harm businesses such as fishing and tourism. As Colin Woodard tells us, in the Pacific Northwest, shrinking salmon populations have cost 72,000 jobs and more than half a billion dollars. In Atlantic

Canada, crushed fisheries have cost several billion dollars in direct government payouts to fishermen who went from producers to welfare cases because government mismanagement let them—and foreign boats—deplete their waters. A generation ago, Maine was home to over 300 trawl-fishing boats; more than 220 have gone out of business. "At this point, there's hardly any fishermen left," says Bert Jongerden, general manager of the Portland Fish Exchange in Maine. "No young guys are getting in." Consumers don't see this because they're further insulated; fisheries have gone global, and we're still living off the declining principal of our account at the great ocean's great fishing bank. But this leads to wider bankruptcy. People cannot catch or eat fish that aren't there, and tourists won't come to see dead reefs.

As we've depleted the ocean of wild fish, fish farming or aquaculture has come on strong. But it's not a panacea. For one thing, fish-farming companies often make fish ponds by destroying productive natural habitats that are critical nursery areas for many wild fish. For another, most fish eat other fish, and

out we passed flocks of gulls and clusters of boats taking advantage of an excellent run of striped bass, benefiting from the world's best example of recovery due to fishery management. What worked was disciplined protection of breeding fish. The lesson we should take from this success is: When you defend your fishing, your fishing deteriorates; when you defend the fish, your fishing improves.

But better management won't be able to do it all. In the next few decades, we expect to welcome two Chinas worth of new people to compete for the world's food sources. This will further complicate everything. People will increasingly occupy the beaches needed by sea turtles who owned beachfront property 100 million years before evolution veered toward anything like an upright ape. Meanwhile, rising sea levels will increasingly squeeze beaches and beachside development.

All the fishery management and protected areas in the world can't solve the problems of climate disruption. Warming waters hold less oxygen, and the ocean has already warmed an average of roughly one half of a degree Fahrenheit to a depth of 1,000 feet in the past 50 years.

We need an ocean ethic that incorporates the interests of those who will come next.

the fish that farmers feed their fish come from the wild. This intensifies pressure on the populations of small fish that wild fish and seabirds also need for food. Fish farms can also be significant sources of pollution. Fortunately, some fish-farming companies are trying to streamline their operations and address these issues.

Fixing some of these problems will require stricter management of fishing and establishing numerous reserves where fish, their habitats, and all the associated species can recover their numbers and productivity. I write these words while drifting 30 miles off Montauk, New York, with some scientists, intent on tagging sharks for studies of their travels. The shark fishing is slow, because of depletion due to their international routes and the depredations of many countries' boats. But on the way

Some of the polar regions are warming more. Melting the Arctic Ocean's summer ice threatens not just polar bears but everything that depends on ice—ringed seals, bearded seals, harp seals, ribbon seals, ivory gulls, various seabirds, and others. In the icy southern seas, krill and penguin populations are declining or shifting their ranges as ice melts. Among those organisms with changing ranges are pathogens, so warming is helping spread diseases to new areas.

Carbon dioxide dissolving into the ocean is changing the water chemistry, pushing it more toward the acidic end of the pH scale. This means that creatures with calcium carbonate shells, such as certain basic planktonic organisms, as well as clams, oysters, scallops, and hard corals, will have to expend more energy toward building their shells. That energy



Children play in the surf on a Balinese beach.

must come from their overall budget, meaning it gets taken out of the energy that would otherwise have gone for growth, reproduction, immune function, and healing. In other words, their health and fertility will decline. Eventually, the ocean will begin *dissolving* coral reefs.

Even that nightmare scenario isn't the end of it. Animals must keep their blood at the right pH to let chemical reactions proceed normally to keep all systems functioning. They, too, will have to divert energy to just keeping their bodies working properly. And as Marah Hardt tells us, this is basically a carbon "tax," a carbon burden on everything that lives in the ocean. Warming waters and changing ocean chemistry can only be addressed with major new energy sources, and soon. We know what we need to do.

But we'll never make the right decisions while it's cheaper to make the wrong decisions. And it'll be cheaper to make the wrong decisions as long as people who pollute and deplete do not pay for pollution and depletion as they go. We'll never make the right choices if markets discount the future and we systematically privatize profits while socializing costs. As long as we continue to accept these costs, as long as our markets consider these major aspects of doing business to

be "external to the market," we have a system that is so out of sync with reality it's basically irrational. We have a mortgage crisis and a federal bailout for largely the same reason: We don't pay as we go.

No single thing will solve these problems. We need new energy sources and fishery reform, and we must replace the traditional fishery-management paradigm focused on taking with one focused on recovery. We need to set aside large areas of ocean. After all, not every place can be a store from which we take; we need some factories whose rationale is to produce the goods. Subsidies have long encouraged overfishing and building along the coast; these should be zeroed-out. Globally, we need to fence the open ocean in a framework of law. The United States should ratify the Law of the Sea Convention, and existing fishing treaties must be reoriented to let scientists, rather than fishing companies and their government representatives, set quotas. We also need a new U.S. oceans agency, as recommended by the Pew Oceans Commission. Currently, U.S. ocean management is lodged within the Department of Commerce, an agency that will never understand living resources, nor value them as its prime concern.

We need new policies. But policies

reflect our values. So what we really need is a new ethic. It will have to be an ethic that considers the long term, not just the present. There is no real tradeoff between the economy and conservation. The tradeoff is always between short-term and long-term thinking. Today versus tomorrow. But tomorrow has a funny way of arriving. And we need to incorporate the interests of those who will come next. No system of ethics, no religious tradition, tells us that it is our right to consider only ourselves and destroy the future. We need to expand our idea of community. In his classic book, *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold tells us that our community includes not just people but "the land." This truly original idea recognizes the value of interrelationships and our total dependence on a functioning world. We can extend this awareness to below the high-tide line. People need the land, of course, but the ocean makes our planet alive and habitable. We need to recognize and incorporate this fact; we need a "sea ethic." **TAP**

Carl Safina is co-founder and president of the Blue Ocean Institute. His 100-plus publications and books include Song for the Blue Ocean, Eye of the Albatross, and Voyage of the Turtle.



Street Fighter

Since Mayor Michael Bloomberg's congestion-pricing plan failed in New York City, his transportation commissioner has taken a piecemeal approach to reclaiming streets from cars.

BY DANA GOLDSTEIN

On Sept. 17, Colin Beavan was riding his folding bicycle down Broadway in Lower Manhattan, near City Hall. Beavan, a writer known as “No Impact Man” for his attempt to reduce his carbon footprint to zero, did not use toilet paper for a year. But let’s not get distracted. On that day, Beavan was simply on his bike, making a routine attempt to steer clear of moving traffic and avoid car doors flying open in his path. That was when, by Beavan’s account, a black Mercedes veered precariously close to him, prompting Beavan to alert its driver to his presence by knocking on the car’s window.

The Mercedes stopped and the driver rolled down the window. “Get your hands off my car, you fucking asshole,” shouted Jeff Klein, a New York state senator who represents the Bronx. The story gets better. Klein just happened to have been, last spring, one of the most vocal opponents of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s congestion-pricing plan for New York City. That plan, which died in the state Assembly, would have charged drivers \$8 to bring their cars into Manhattan below 60th Street and was enthusiastically supported by environmentalists and public-space advocates nationwide, including Beavan and the nonprofit on whose board he sits, Transportation Alternatives.

No-Impact Man, a first-rate self-promoter, milked the confrontation for all it was worth. He publicized a letter he wrote to Klein, eventually securing a meeting with the state senator. There, Klein apologized to Beavan for his bad language and pledged to revisit the issue of congestion pricing and consider other proposals to make New York streets safer for cyclists and pedestrians.

A happy ending, to be sure. Yet the bitterness of Beavan and Klein’s initial encounter is typical of debates between transportation reformers, caricatured as car-hating, overeducated hippies, and their opponents, who portray themselves (sometimes in spite of luxury automobiles) as representatives of the common man. It is ironic, then, that the new national face of the movement to reduce driving and reclaim streets for pedestrians and cyclists is Michael Bloomberg, the finance titan and one-time Republican who spent \$75.5 million to become New York City’s mayor.

In his first five years in office, Bloomberg was hardly seen as anti-car. But in 2007, his administration rolled out an ambi-

tious plan to reduce New York City’s carbon emissions. The city reclaimed auto lanes, turning them over to pedestrians and cyclists, and swore to put every resident in walking distance of green space by 2030. On the transit front, New York is expanding express bus service, creating dedicated bus lanes, and opening several new ferry routes on the East River. Even longtime New York lefties, the sort of people who have decried Bloomberg’s fortune-fueled reign for seven years, are impressed.

On the national level, Mike Bloomberg is now recognized as a progressive reformer, and his history as a Democrat turned Republican turned Independent, all for political gain, is largely overlooked. But New Yorkers, whose memories are longer, could hardly have predicted that the most recent iteration of their mayor’s chameleon career would be the promotion of a bikeable, walkable city. What even most local observers don’t realize is that the Bloomberg administration’s unexpected commitment to these issues is due less to ideological conviction than to the influence of one woman: Janette Sadik-Khan, commissioner of New York City’s Department of Transportation.

Sadik-Khan’s policies have attracted national attention from transportation reformers, and she has been discussed as a possible transportation secretary in Barack Obama’s Cabinet. Last April, state legislators in Albany dealt a body blow to the Bloomberg agenda by scrapping congestion pricing. But Sadik-Khan has pressed on with a slate of piecemeal reforms that are transforming, however slowly, the landscape of New York.

As Ron Schiffman, a former commissioner of New York’s Department of City Planning, puts it, “She’s a guerilla bureaucrat.”

ON A GLARINGLY SUNNY TUESDAY in late September, Sadik-Khan held a press conference in the Village. It was Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, so much of official New York was on hiatus. Early that morning, Bloomberg, Sadik-Khan’s boss, had set off a media maelstrom by leaking that he planned to seek a third term in office, in defiance of the city’s charter. The press and public awaited the mayor’s official announcement scheduled for later that week.

But Sadik-Khan hadn’t cleared her schedule for any of those events. Instead, she was unveiling the finalists in a competition

to design a new official bike rack for the city of New York. Over 200 artists had entered the contest, from as nearby as Brooklyn and as far afield as Peru and Italy. The 10 finalist models had been affixed there in Astor Place, and Sadik-Khan playfully showed journalists her favorites. “This one doubles as a bench!” she exclaimed, hoisting herself upon a flat, S-curved rack and swinging her legs girlishly beneath her. Later, chatting with some women from the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum, the co-sponsor of the competition, Sadik-Khan flipped up her charcoal gray dress to reveal spandex bike shorts underneath. “Fashion forward!” she declared, laughing. A young-looking 48-year-old who sports a chic bob with bangs, Sadik-Khan is a bike commuter herself, traveling from her West Village home to her financial district office several days a week on a Specialized Globe.

Amid an economic crisis that threatens the state and city of New York with the loss of 120,000 jobs and \$3.5 billion in tax revenues, an event to promote cycling could seem a small-bore distraction. But Sadik-Khan’s initiatives are central to the larger Bloomberg agenda. She was appointed commissioner in April 2007, concurrent with the mayor’s roll-out of PlaNYC 2030, a proposal to reduce New York’s carbon footprint by 30 percent over two decades and make the city an international leader in sustainable urban growth.

The centerpiece of that effort, the congestion-pricing plan, dominated Sadik-Khan’s first year in office. The city council approved the plan in a 30-20 vote in March, but Bloomberg and Sadik-Khan were rebuffed at the state level, accused of attempting to strong-arm the legislature into supporting a policy that benefited Manhattan at the expense of the suburbs and outer boroughs. It certainly didn’t help that Sadik-Khan’s driver was pulled over and ticketed for illegally running the car’s sirens and lights as he sped the commissioner to Albany to lobby for the congestion-pricing bill. (Yes, you can travel by train between New York City and Albany. It takes two-and-a-half hours each way and costs between \$72 and \$138 round-trip.)

For advocates, the failure of congestion pricing was heart-breaking. In round after round of negotiations, the plan had been tweaked and made less objectionable to the outer-borough and suburban legislators who viewed it skeptically. Suburban commuters would be able to deduct the tax from their daily toll charge, and taxis would have to pay only a \$1 fee to enter the cordoned zone. Disabled drivers would be exempted. The major East and West Side highways would be free, as would be bridges and their approaches, even those in Midtown. After all the changes, it seemed that delivery trucks and drivers-by-choice would bear the brunt of the fee, along with the mostly affluent residents living within the pricing zone. After all, commuters had the option of driving to a subway or bus stop outside of the zone and hopping on.

The federal government promised New York City a sorely needed \$354 million to support mass transit if the program were approved in Albany. Gov. David Paterson supported the

plan, as did state Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, a Republican. Surprisingly, much of the opposition was Democratic. Some legislators claimed they couldn’t support congestion pricing if it didn’t include a sliding scale for income. Transit advocates suspected an attachment to car culture was the real stumbling block. Regardless, on April 7, state Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, a Democrat who represents Manhattan’s Lower East Side, announced that support for the bill was so scarce he wasn’t even putting it to a vote.

What happened? In part, Albany politics are just formulated differently than New York City’s, where the council is relatively powerless and in thrall to the mayor. Jeff Klein, for example, the Bronx state senator who fought congestion pricing, represents a borough in which every single City Council member supported the plan. But Albany Democrats simply didn’t trust Bloomberg and weren’t in a mood to support his signature legislative priority. It was difficult for Dems to forget that the mayor was once a Republican when, earlier this year, he donated \$500,000 to help state Senate Republicans retain their majority.

Politically, Bloomberg may have also made a mistake in selling congestion pricing primarily as a fix for the budget shortfall facing the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority, when it was really an environmental and public-health initiative. Had congestion pricing passed, the combination of the fees collected and the matching grants from the federal government would have covered only a fraction of the MTA’s operating and capital needs, leaving the agency \$9 billion in debt. “Congestion pricing was never a choice between a funded system and an unfunded system,” says New York state Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, who represents parts of southern Westchester County and was a leading opponent of the proposal.

Whatever the motivations of congestion-pricing opponents, their success in blocking Bloomberg’s plan put his national reputation as a can-do reformer in doubt.

PLANYC IS PREMISED ON the idea that with New York City’s population expected to grow by 1 million over the next two decades, aggressive steps must be taken to increase access to green space and affordable housing, improve public health, preserve and retrofit historic buildings, and fight global warming. Bloomberg introduced the agenda, which contains 127 sustainability initiatives, on April 22, 2007. In the words of City Councilman John Liu, chair of the council’s transportation committee, “The mayor became an environmentalist rather suddenly on Earth Day 2007, at a time when there was fevered speculation that he was going to launch a presidential bid.”

Indeed, PlaNYC represented an about-face. When Bloomberg was elected mayor in 2001, transportation reformers had high hopes that he would replace Rudy Giuliani’s transportation commissioner, veteran New York City bureaucrat Iris Weinshall, with Sadik-Khan—or someone a lot like her. But Bloomberg, then a Republican, chose to keep Weinshall in

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place. The decision was widely viewed as an attempt to reach out across party lines to Weinshall's husband, Sen. Chuck Schumer. Though advocates say Weinshall was a competent manager, they accuse her of being uninterested in transportation policy and of deferring major decisions to reactionary community boards and traffic specialists, whose primary goals were to move more cars through the streets faster.

Bloomberg's own record on public spaces was far from stellar. An expert hired to direct the Transportation Department's cycling program, Andrew Vesselinovitch, quit in 2006, claiming that Weinshall and Bloomberg rejected most of his ideas and were insufficiently committed to reforming the streetscape. Under the influence of former Deputy Mayor for Economic Development Dan Doctoroff, another Wall Street veteran, the Bloomberg administration had been pushing unpopular proposals to construct massive sports stadiums and apartment towers, replete with thousands of parking spaces, on the far West Side of Manhattan and in downtown Brooklyn. "Here we have the most transit-oriented city in America, and many of Bloomberg's most treasured development plans, at that point, were tied to 750-spot parking lagoons, as if this were the suburbs," says Aaron Naparstek, editor of Streetsblog, which lobbies for "livable streets."

When Weinshall announced her departure from the agency in January 2007, Transportation Alternatives urged Bloomberg to look for a new commissioner in London, which had instituted congestion pricing in 2003. That plan is seen as a qualified success. City carbon emissions were cut by 16 percent. Cycling within the zone increased by a third, bus ridership increased by 14 percent, and for the first time in decades, ridership on the Underground, London's subway system, increased rather than decreased. Though revenues from congestion pricing were less than expected, the tax raised about £100 million annually for London's transit system.

The New York press reported, however, that Bloomberg was not looking overseas. He was choosing between Sadik-Khan and Michael Horodniceanu, both American engineering-firm executives who had served in government. While Sadik-Khan was known as a reformer with a focus on mass transit, Horodniceanu was a former city traffic commissioner who boasted of having managed the largest parking system in the United States. Bloomberg's decision would signal exactly how serious he was about embracing the environmentalist mantle. He ended up appointing Sadik-Khan, of course, and transportation reformers rejoiced.

Sadik-Khan grew up in the New York metropolitan area, the daughter of divorced parents. Her father was a managing director at the brokerage Paine-Webber, and her mother was a writer

who covered City Hall for the *New York Post*. She describes herself as having always been fascinated by the life of cities. After college at Occidental in Los Angeles (where she temporarily took up vegetarianism), law school at Columbia (where she met her husband Mark Geistfeld, now a New York University law professor), and a stint as a corporate attorney, Sadik-Khan decided to go into public service. "I wanted to do something that really touched people's lives every day," she explains. "I was joking with my mom, and she was like, 'Well, there are two choices then. There's transportation or sanitation.' So you know, I decided to focus on transportation."

Sadik-Khan climbed the ranks of the Dinkins administration in the early 1990s, serving as the mayor's principal adviser on mass transit. After a failed attempt to institute light-rail service across 42nd Street, she learned that the Metropolitan Transit Authority and community groups would fight the construction of a surface-level train. (Now she sees dedicated bus lanes as a

sort of back-door step toward light rail, mentioning that cities like Bogotá, Colombia, and Curitiba, Brazil, are working toward light rail by reclaiming auto space in this way.)

After Dinkins lost his re-election bid to Rudy Giuliani in 1993, Sadik-Khan hightailed it to Washington, D.C., where she worked for Bill Clinton's Department of Transportation, reforming the bus-manufacturing industry and creating a popular art-in-transit program. She became the Federal Transit Authority's chief financial officer, responsible for a \$4 billion capital construction budget. At the close of the Clinton years,

Sadik-Khan re-entered the private sector as a senior vice president at the international engineering firm Parsons Brinckerhoff, where she worked until she was tapped by Bloomberg.

As New York City transportation commissioner, Sadik-Khan presides over 6,000 miles of road, 12,000 miles of sidewalk, and the Staten Island ferry, which transports 65,000 people each day. (The MTA manages New York's subways, trains, and buses, and often works in partnership with the Department of Transportation.) She administers a budget of more than half a billion dollars a year. It isn't difficult to imagine Sadik-Khan returning to D.C.—she's wonky. If you ask her a question about transportation, she is likely to answer it in the form of a 10-minute policy brief and cap it all off with a press release. ("We're improving the quality of life, improving the business quality here, and also doing a lot for the environment!") Naparstek of Streetsblog calls Sadik-Khan "a total geek about transportation."

Unsurprisingly, the other geeks adore her. Naparstek, who wrote *Honku*, a book of haikus decrying car traffic, says, "I know a lot of people who are like, God, that would be a mistake if Janette went back to Washington. We need her to keep doing



Transportation Geek: Janette Sadik-Khan rides her bike to work.



Taking Back The Streets: A cyclist rides on one of the newly dedicated lanes established by Sadik-Khan to encourage biking in the city.

these things in New York. She could have more of an impact here.” Paul Steely White, executive director of Transportation Alternatives, cycled to the bike-rack unveiling wearing a tie adorned with a silk-screened bike logo. He told the press that since Sadik-Khan’s appointment, “there really isn’t much left for [us] advocates to say.” Later he says, “A lot of problems we thought were intractable. She has proven otherwise.”

STUCK IN A HOLDING PATTERN on big-picture transportation reform, Sadik-Khan’s Department of Transportation has shifted gears. The Bloomberg administration plans to revisit congestion pricing, but in the meantime, the mayor has given his transportation commissioner wide latitude in enacting a host of incremental street reforms. Sadik-Khan’s department has reclaimed two car lanes on Broadway, one of Manhattan’s most clogged thoroughfares, and turned them into “Broadway Boulevard,” an artery of public plazas where pedestrians can lunch or just relax right in the middle of the street—if they find it relaxing to be surrounded by frantic traffic. On Ninth Avenue along Manhattan’s West Side, the Transportation Department has instituted New York’s first experiment in “complete streets,” an idea Sadik-Khan imported from Copenhagen; a new bike lane there is protected from parked cars and traffic by plastic bollards and a buffer zone.

These reappropriations of auto lanes have been called radical and elitist, proving that even in America’s largest and densest city, car culture holds powerful sway. In September, the *New York Post* dubbed Bloomberg “Mike the road hog” and predicted the Broadway Boulevard plazas would go unused during the winter months. In Chelsea and the meatpacking district, where metered parking spaces and an auto lane were lost to the Ninth Avenue bike-lane project, local community boards complained that they were informed of the changes just

a week before construction began. Liu, the city councilman, tells me that Sadik-Khan and Bloomberg adhere to a “new, anti-car religion” that will alienate outer-borough residents unless mass transit service is significantly improved and expanded *before* restrictions are placed on car use.

In actuality, that’s exactly what the Department of Transportation is doing. New York City is unlike any other place in America, Sadik-Khan points out; more than half of its residents do not own a car. Of the 28 percent of trips in the city that are made by automobile, most are less than three miles in length. Transportation reformers contend that politicians who oppose congestion pricing, like Jeff Klein, are unduly influenced by their own experience as affluent drivers. The Kleins of the world claim to speak on behalf of the working class, but in truth, advocates say, the neediest New Yorkers don’t own cars. They rely almost exclusively on mass transit and live in neighborhoods where auto congestion seriously impacts public health. It is the children of the car-less poor who are diagnosed with asthma at epidemic rates.

“I’m radically pro-choice,” Sadik-Khan told me during an interview in her expansive 10th-floor office on Worth Street, where a clock counts down the days left in Bloomberg’s second term. “I’m pro—all modes of transportation, not one mode elevated above all others, which I think has been the case in the past. We’re really just trying to rebalance our system, bring some acupuncture to what has been a sick body.”

Sadik-Khan sees the initial rejection of congestion pricing as an opportunity. “You know, no big idea happens in New York the first time around,” she says. “It is almost a benefit that congestion pricing didn’t pass, because now we are able to get all these pieces in place prior to the start of pricing.”

In an effort to improve transit access and convince legisla-



tors that their constituents won't be underserved if they are pushed out of their cars by congestion pricing, Sadik-Khan's department is developing East River ferry service between Manhattan and the exploding North Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Greenpoint. The department is also placing a new focus on improving bus service, creating a dedicated bus lane on 34th Street in Manhattan and instituting select bus service cutting east-west through the Bronx. That route, the first of its kind in New York, features bus lanes, curbside fare collection, and more buses making fewer stops. Currently, New York City has the largest public bus fleet in North America but some of the slowest bus routes. During rush hour in Midtown Manhattan, one can walk from the Hudson River to the East River and beat the cross-town bus. "I can't wish people onto a bus that's moving at two miles per hour," Sadik-Khan admits. "I have to give them service that encourages them to do it."

Transportation reformers believe, perhaps naively, that drivers will change their habits en masse if given the proper service improvements and disincentives (like the congestion tax). One of their goals is to demonstrate just how enjoyable, cheap, and easy life without cars can be. They point to the popularity of Summer Streets, another one of Sadik-Khan's innovations, in which seven miles of East Side roads were closed to cars on three consecutive Saturdays in August. Sure enough, the streets were overtaken by elated pedestrians and cyclists. Smaller-scale road closings took place over the summer in Brooklyn and Queens as well, and Sadik-Khan believes these will become regular features of New York City life, regardless of who succeeds her and Bloomberg.

"I think along with the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the marathon, Summer Streets is going to be one of those iconic events going forward," she says. Of course, those events, too, involve clearing the streets of cars and reclaiming them for pedestrians.

BUT ENVIRONMENTAL PRIORITIES haven't completely overtaken Bloomberg's penchant for big-box development. Just a few weeks after Sadik-Khan's appointment and the PlaNYC rollout, the mayor was in court defending the city's right to construct 20,000 new parking spaces in Hell's Kitchen. Sadik-Khan, for her part, avoids speaking about the elements of the Bloomberg agenda that clearly contradict her own stated goals. "I feel very strongly that he put his money where his mouth is," she says of Bloomberg's transportation record.

Much of the Bloomberg administration's energy these days is focused on winning the mayor a third term. If congestion pricing is revisited, it will likely be after the mayoral election of November 2009. And for that effort to be successful, Bloomberg and Sadik-Khan will have to overcome the cultural antagonism between the outer-boroughs and Manhattan, and between the city and its suburbs. They will also have to do a better job of wooing Democratic state legislators.

Sadik-Khan is optimistic, pointing to opinion polls that found 60 percent of New Yorkers support congestion pricing, provided that the funds are used to improve mass transit. "The other piece of messaging that we found works is that people are concerned about obesity, they're concerned about asthma, and they're concerned about their ability to get around," Sadik-Khan says. "And not owning a car will save you \$6,000 a year. That's a lot of money!"

Sadik-Khan believes the public, especially since this year's rise in gas prices, is far ahead of its elected representatives on understanding the need to reduce dependency on cars. "I do think congestion pricing is a matter of when, not if," she says. The fact remains that Sadik-Khan's public plazas, bike lanes, and road closing are hardly making a dent in the city's car use; they are more of an inconvenience for drivers than a routine-altering incentive. But there has been some good news; a recent Transportation Department report found that commuter cycling in the city rose 35 percent between 2007 and 2008.

There's little doubt that despite her stated commitment to stay on in a third Bloomberg term, Sadik-Khan is intrigued by the notion of getting back into the transit game at the federal level. She says she likes Obama's transportation agenda (he supports congestion pricing, for example) and will do whatever she can to help his administration. She is already drafting a new national transportation policy as president of the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), a coalition of transportation czars representing 13 of the nation's largest cities. A key priority is enabling the federal government to directly fund transportation projects in large cities, instead of requiring the money to pass through state capitals like Albany, which often don't prioritize urban interests.

Currently, highways are eligible for a greater percentage of federal funding than is mass transit; NACTO would like to change that, as well.

The story of congestion pricing and piecemeal reforms in New York, at least thus far, doesn't provide much in the way of a model for creating a transformative national transportation policy. Still, under Sadik-Khan, New York City transit geeks are feeling better about their movement than they have since Jane Jacobs was organizing the West Village. "So congestion pricing didn't pass, that's true," Sadik-Khan says. "But one of the things it allowed us to do was underscore to the public the importance of looking at our streets differently. There have been lots of things that have changed in New York City in the last 20 to 30 years. Our streets are not one of them. Our streets have really been designed as more utilitarian corridors to get cars as quickly as possible from point A to point B. Now there's a recognition that we can't keep doing that."

And for now, that's progress. **TAP**



EVEN WITHOUT CONGESTION PRICING, CYCLING TO WORK IN THE CITY ROSE 35 PERCENT BETWEEN 2007 AND 2008.

Are Cows Worse Than Cars?

Everyone knows driving an SUV or leaving the lights on is bad for the earth. But when it comes to your environmental impact, what's on your plate is just as important.

BY BEN ADLER

These days almost any proposal to reduce global warming gets taken seriously, even by conservatives. Solar panels are proposed for powering everything except submarines. Oilman T. Boone Pickens wants to put windmills on every empty patch of land in Texas, and Republicans have finally found something to like about France: nuclear power.

But when Rajendra Pachauri, who runs the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), made a suggestion that could reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 18 percent, he was excoriated. Why was his proposal so unpalatable? Because he suggested eating less meat would be the easiest way people could reduce their carbon footprint, with one meat-free day per week as a first step. “How convenient for him: He’s a vegetarian,” sneered a *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* editorial. “Dr. Pachauri should be more concerned about his own diet. A new study shows that a deficiency of vitamin B-12, found primarily in meat, fish and milk, can lead to brain shrinkage.” Boris Johnson, London’s outspoken mayor, posted a long screed on his blog, declaring, “The whole proposition is so irritating that I am almost minded to eat more meat in response.”

Johnson may not appreciate the environmental value of replacing his steak and kidney pie with a tofu scramble, but the benefits would be quite real. Animal agriculture is responsible for local pollution from animal waste and chemical use and for greenhouse gas emissions from the energy-intensive process of growing feed and raising livestock, plus the, ahem, byproducts of animal digestion. It would be much easier—and cheaper—to give up meat than to, say, convert an entire country’s electrical grid to using solar, wind, or nuclear energy. A rural Montanan might have no choice but to drive to work, but he can certainly switch out his pork chop for pinto beans. While Pachauri was correct to note that one need not go vegan to help the environment—simply eating *less* meat would help—he could have also emphasized the more politically appealing point that one can be a carnivore and still reduce one’s impact by choosing different meats. Even limiting one’s meat consumption to chicken yields major environmental benefits—not to mention health and financial benefits.

What should be a surprise is not that Pachauri made the comments he did but that it took him so long to do so. In fact, the environmental movement has largely ignored meat consumption. The man with whom the IPCC shared its Nobel Prize for raising climate change awareness, Al Gore, has never mentioned the environmental impact of meat consumption. Green groups tell their conscientious constituents to trade in their SUV for a Prius and buy compact-fluorescent light bulbs but haven’t dared suggest that they give up steak.

Perhaps even more so than cars, meat is deeply embedded in American culture. Apple pie may be the quintessential American food, but McDonald’s hamburgers aren’t far behind. We carve turkey on Thanksgiving and host Fourth of July barbecues. Without meat, how do you know it’s a meal? To most Americans, veggies and tofu are a laughable substitute. “It was a reaction to the ’60s hippie cooking that gave this important idea of vegetarianism a bad name,” says Alice Waters, the chef and author who is widely credited with creating the organic-food revolution. Environmentalists, who know they must change the stereotype that they are all either tree-hugging radicals or self-righteous scolds, may be reluctant to embrace vegetarianism because of those easily caricatured cultural connotations.

“Environmental groups don’t want to come out too strongly on it,” says Danielle Nierenberg, who researches the intersection of animal agriculture and climate change for both the Humane Society, an organization that promotes the compassionate treatment of animals, and the World Watch Institute, an environmental think tank. “People get very upset when they feel they are being told what to eat.”

NOW SHOULD BE ENVIRONMENTAL vegetarianism’s big moment. Global warming is the single biggest threat to the health of the planet, and meat consumption plays a bigger role in greenhouse gas emissions than even many environmentalists realize. The production and transportation of meat and dairy, particularly if you include the grains that are fed to livestock, is much more energy-intensive than it is for plants. Animals, especially cattle, also release gases like methane and nitrous oxide that, pound for pound, are up to 30 times more damaging than carbon dioxide.



Internationally there is an additional cost to animal agriculture: massive deforestation to make land available for grazing, which releases greenhouse gases as the trees are burned and removes valuable foliage that absorbs carbon dioxide. As a result, according to a 2006 United Nations report, internationally the livestock sector accounts for 18 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions—more than the transportation sector.

The numbers for the United States are more hotly contested. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that meat is only half of the U.S. agriculture sector's share of domestic greenhouse gases and that the entire agriculture industry produces 7.56 percent of the U.S.' contribution. This is considerably less than the transportation sector, which the EPA estimates accounts for roughly 29 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. The American Meat Institute, an industry trade association, cites the EPA numbers as credible. But they fail to take into account that 50 percent of grain is being fed to livestock and that its production and transportation costs should also be attributed to what you find in the meat or dairy aisle of the supermarket. Additionally, the EPA numbers do not include large categories such as the transportation of plants and animals.

In fact, some environmentalists allege that the Bush administration's EPA chose the lowest possible estimate, which the meat industry routinely cites, for political reasons. "With the EPA being in the pocket of the meat industry, it's not in their interest to come up with the best numbers," says Bruce Friedrich, who works on environmental issues for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

The real U.S. figure is roughly halfway between the UN's and the EPA's numbers, according to independent experts. "There are many assumptions that one needs to make when quantifying emissions," explains Gidon Eshel, an environmental studies professor at Bard College at Simon's Rock. "It's not that any one assumption is correct. Almost all of them are defensible." Eshel estimates that if you used the UN's standards, animal agriculture would account for 10 percent or 11 percent of U.S. greenhouse gases.

Consumers may not have a say in whether or not another coal power plant will be built, but they do have control over how much meat they personally eat. A University of Chicago study co-authored by Eshel found that, for the average American, "the greenhouse gas emissions of various diets vary by as much as the difference between owning an average sedan versus a Sport Utility Vehicle." One meat eater going vegetarian results in putting the equivalent of 1.5 fewer tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually. Further, according to the study, if all Americans ate a vegan diet it would cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 6 percent, probably more. Those savings would have a more immediate impact than would reducing the same amount of carbon through other means, because the average time scale for removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere

is about 10 times as slow as for methane. Most important, as Eshel notes, one can reduce personal greenhouse gas emissions through dietary change more easily and comfortably than, say, cutting back on electricity use by living in the dark or forgoing air conditioning all summer.

But meat eating has grown dramatically in developed countries in recent decades, with developing countries beginning to catch up. The average American eats 200 pounds of meat, poultry, and fish per capita per year, 50 pounds more than Americans did in the 1950s. Between 1970 and 2002 the average person in a developing country went from consuming 24 pounds to 65 pounds of meat annually. In all, the world's total meat consumption in 2007 was estimated to be 284 million tons, compared to



CATTLE RELEASE GASES THAT, POUND FOR POUND, ARE UP TO 30 TIMES MORE DAMAGING THAN CARBON DIOXIDE.

71 million tons in 1961. It is expected to double by 2050. "You're seeing now India and China, with a growing middle class, are eating more meat," says Laura Shapiro, a culinary historian and author of *Something from the Oven*, about the cuisine of 1950s America.

Yet the environmental conversation remains solely about cars and power plants, not beef and pork.

UNLIKE THE VITRIOL THAT Rajendra Pachauri encountered, Caryn Hartglass has been met with a different reaction when she suggests people eat less meat: deafening silence. Hartglass is the only paid staffer for Earth Save, the most prominent (using that term loosely, as it only has 3,000 members) organization dedicated solely to promoting an animal-free diet for environmental reasons. "I go to [environmental organizations'] Web sites and it's supposed to tell you what to do to reduce global warming and it doesn't say eat less meat," says Hartglass. "So I ask them why not. They say they're focusing on reducing carbon-dioxide emissions not methane-gas emissions."

Why are environmental groups and even politicians willing to tell Americans to drive smaller cars or take the bus to work but unwilling to tell them to eat less meat? If you live in a recently built suburb you must drive most places whether you wish to or not. Walking or public transit simply isn't an option. But you could stop buying ground beef and start buying veggie burgers tomorrow, saving yourself some money and sparing yourself some cholesterol in the process. And yet no one, other than a small cadre of lonely fringe activists like Hartglass, devotes much energy to making the connection. Food experts and environmentalists generally worry that Americans might react with hostility similar to Boris Johnson's if asked to put down their hamburgers.

Their timidity is understandable. On the rare occasion that the federal government has tried to even suggest that Americans lower their meat consumption, it has failed. In 1977, the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs recommended eating less meat and dairy to combat heart disease.

But the meat and dairy lobbies complained vociferously, and the committee rephrased the report to say that people should instead choose animal products that would “reduce saturated fat consumption.” Just to be sure no one else got the foolish idea of suggesting Americans eat less meat, the beef industry spent heavily to successfully defeat Committee Chairman George McGovern in 1980.

But while politicians may have reason to fear the meat lobby, environmental groups are supposed to push the political envelope. They began calling for caps on carbon emissions in the late 1990s, before it was politically palatable, and both major party candidates for president endorsed cap-and-trade in 2008. Many people see their car or truck as a part of their identity, but that hasn’t stopped the Sierra Club from ensuring that every American is aware of the environmental threat their vehicle poses. And yet, the major environmental groups have been unwilling to push the meat issue. “I don’t know of anyone in the environmental community that has taken a stance of ‘we support no meat consumption because of global warming,’” says Tim Greef, deputy legislative director for the League of Conservation Voters. Adds Nierenberg, “It’s the elephant in the room for environmentalists. They haven’t found a good way to address it.”

The Sierra Club’s list of 29 programs—which includes such

endanger that relationship. But the Sierra Club denies that is the reason for its lack of a stance on meat, saying that it focuses instead on issues where it can have a greater impact. “It does not necessarily pay to appear to be telling people how to live their lives,” says Hamilton. “We want to give positive solutions. We’ve tried to focus on the things that we feel can make the greatest difference with the energy and resources that we have.”

Other environmental groups, such as National Resources Defense Council, acknowledge that reducing meat consumption would be helpful in ameliorating emissions, but it simply is not a high priority. “We haven’t taken a position [on meat],” says Elizabeth Martin Perera, a climate-policy specialist at the NRDC. “There’s no reason not to; we just haven’t gotten around to it.” The League of Conservation Voters, which coordinates environmental political efforts, explains it as a process of fighting one battle at a time. “Once you deal with the largest emitters of carbon, complementary policies need to get passed,” says Greef. “After they pass cap-and-trade, you will see work for a better transportation bill, work on deforestation and the logging industry. Meat falls into that bucket.” When it comes to sorting out legislative priorities, Greef’s position is sensible. The car-dependence of the American landscape and other energy-intensive consumption habits make



relatively small-bore issues as trash-transfer stations (they threaten “quality of life and property values”)—does not include any on the impact of meat consumption. Their main list of things you can do to help prevent global warming mentions hanging your clothes out to dry instead of using a dryer but makes no mention of eating less meat. “The Sierra Club isn’t opposed to eating meat, so that’s sort of the long and short of it. [We are] not opposed to hunting, not opposed to ranching,” says Josh Dorner, a spokesman for the Sierra Club, the nation’s oldest and largest grass-roots environmental organization.

Of course, asking Americans to eat less meat is not the same thing as actively condemning ranching and hunting, but ranchers and hunters might consider it a threat to their livelihood and lifestyle all the same. And there’s the rub. Though the Sierra Club does not have a position on meat consumption, it does ally with small ranchers and hunters on an array of issues, from opposing the development of giant feedlots to preserving land. “We believe that making connections with hunters and anglers is critical to ultimately getting a solution to global warming,” says Dave Hamilton, director of the global warming and energy program at the Sierra Club. “They are often in places that are targets for what we’re trying to do, and they are a key constituency for policy makers.”

Calling for less meat consumption would almost certainly

attacking those larger emitters a higher priority domestically.

But environmental groups do more than just lobby Congress. First and foremost, they explain how our activities affect the environment. It is obvious that a car spews pollution, but to see your beef burrito first as a burping cow, and before that as oil being burned to grow corn to feed that cow, requires education. The movement also can advise the public on lifestyle choices and demonstrate how those choices can be practical. A typical Sierra Club member cannot do much to pass cap-and-trade, but she can skip the bacon in her breakfast sandwich.

REMEMBER THOSE TV COMMERCIALS that declared, “Beef, it’s what’s for dinner”? Only a few foods are so central to American cuisine and culture that they can assert their primacy simply by reminding you that you’ve always consumed them. Americans do indeed eat an extraordinary amount of meat, roughly twice their daily recommended dose of protein. But contrary to the commercial, this was not always the case—consumption has not just been driven by market demand. The other culprit is cheap corn.

Meat has become cheaper—and therefore more prevalent in American diets—in the last 30 years because it has been heavily subsidized, albeit indirectly. Ever since Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz declared in 1973 that “what we want out



of agriculture is plenty of food,” American agricultural policy has encouraged overproduction and lower prices, primarily in the form of massive subsidies for corn. Livestock, in turn, consumes more than half the corn grown in the U.S. because it is cheaper to confine animals to a tight lot and funnel corn in than to allow them to graze freely on grass. With cheaper grain and denser, dirtier feedlots replacing free-range ranches, meat prices and meat quality have dropped, while meat’s environmental impact has increased.

“The livestock doesn’t get direct subsidies per se, but they have until recently done very well by getting subsidized corn,” says Larry Mitchell, director of government affairs at the American Corn Growers Association (ACGA), a rival offshoot of the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), which the ACGA contends represents agribusiness conglomerates rather than small farmers. “Most of the huge, confined animal-feeding operations, factory farms, wouldn’t be viable if they had to pay the true cost of corn,” Mitchell says.

Some environmental scientists contend that, in addition to filling local groundwater with animal waste and destroying the open spaces of the West with feedlots, grain-fed meat creates more emissions per pound than grass-fed meat. “Some work from the EPA suggests that you can reduce methane by half by not confining animals and not feeding them high-energy grains,” says Nierenberg. But, she concedes, the evidence is mixed. Other studies, such as those promoted by conservatives, find the opposite: Eating grass gives cows gas. A spokesperson for the NCGA declined to comment for this article but referred me to Alex Avery, a researcher at the conservative Hudson Institute. Avery, who acknowledges that his research is underwritten by industry interests, cites studies suggesting that corn-fed livestock emits less methane.

Fundamentally, though, Avery and food-industry spokespeople don’t acknowledge the role that cheap corn plays in the prevalence of meat in the American diet. “The world needs to eat,” says Tamara McCann Thies, chief environmental counsel for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, “and demand dictates how much beef is produced in the U.S. and elsewhere.” Of course, demand is a product of price, and price is a product of production costs, and production costs are affected by subsidies. The world needs to eat, but it does not need to eat burgers.

Indeed, while a public-relations campaign would have some marginal impact, it has long been established that only government regulation can be certain to change America’s consumption patterns. Despite all the publicity surrounding the ills of oil, average auto fuel efficiency has stagnated. And how many people do you know who hang-dry their clothes to keep the polar ice cap afloat?

So what would a political agenda to reduce the emissions from animal agriculture look like? The answer is surprisingly simple.

As with so many environmentally damaging habits, such as

driving, our over-consumption of factory-farmed animals is the product of a set of indirect subsidies that make its cost artificially low. Much of the agriculture industry is exempt from compliance with the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, thus reducing its business costs. Grain subsidies lower the cost of feed. And the Government Accountability Office recently found that the EPA has failed to hold factory farms accountable for massive violations, essentially another form of government subsidy by freeing them of the cost of compliance. Undoing any of these boondoggles would raise the cost of meat. Another option is to raise the standards of animal treatment, which would also make the production of meat more expensive. California recently passed a ballot proposal to ban cruelly overcrowded conditions in factory farms. By eliminating dense feedlots, which animal-rights activists and even many farmers regard as inhumane and which create local pollution, it should become more expensive to produce meat because it will require more land per animal. Although it is not clear how much meat consumption would fall as a result, it makes sense, as it does with driving, to at least remove the price advantage of such an environmentally destructive activity.

And, of course, the government could remove corn subsidies. Whatever the merits of grass-fed versus grain-fed meat, an increase in the price of corn would mean more expensive meat. But the institutional barriers to removing subsidies—the key committee positions of senators from farm states, the power of the Iowa caucuses, the political largesse of agriprocessor Archer Daniels Midland—make such a dramatic reversal in American agricultural policy an incredibly tall order. In any case, the environmental movement has not shown any desire to make this a top priority.

In the meantime, activists are taking small bites out of the problem. Food experts like Shapiro and Waters say that raising awareness about reducing portion size, which has grown over the years, is one first step. And a Web site called PB&J Campaign, launched in February 2007, encourages a plant-based diet for environmental reasons. Bernard Brown, the site’s 31-year-old creator, says he is careful to advocate not outright vegetarianism but intermediate steps that are more realistic.

Yet they still have a long way to go. “I think it’s amazing that even the greenest of green liberal environment activists, the vast majority of them tend to consume meat at the same rate as people who think global warming is a hoax,” says Mike Tidwell, director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network. “Meat consumption seems to be the last thing that progressive people address in their lifestyle. If I had a nickel for every global warming conference that had roast beef on the menu, I’d be rich.” **TAP**

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GREEN GROUPS TELL THEIR CONSTITUENTS TO TRADE IN THEIR SUV FOR A PRIUS—BUT HAVEN’T DARED SUGGEST THAT THEY GIVE UP STEAK.

Getting Real on Climate Change

*We'll never succeed in making dirty energy too expensive.
Let's make clean energy cheap.*

BY TED NORDHAUS AND MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER

The wave of optimism that American environmentalists rode into 2008 reached its zenith sometime around April 22—Earth Day. Green was everywhere, from the pages of *Sports Illustrated* to NBC's Green Week to a new cable channel, Planet Green. Armed with an Oscar and a Nobel Prize, Al Gore announced a \$300 million global-warming advertising campaign. In the Democratic presidential primary, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton competed over who had the strongest climate and energy record, and John McCain marked his “maverick” status by his intermittent support for legislation to cap carbon emissions.

Since then, the environmental movement has experienced a reversal as unexpected as it has been swift. In May, when Sen. Barbara Boxer brought climate legislation to the Senate floor, Sen. Joe Lieberman, a co-sponsor, announced that he could get the 60 votes to overcome a filibuster. Green groups proclaimed that the coming Senate debate would be a show of force—a “dress rehearsal” for 2009, when a friendlier president might sign even stronger legislation.

What happened next was indeed a dress rehearsal, just not the one the environmental movement had expected. During the debate, Senate Democrats spoke of the urgent threat to civilization and displayed pictures of melting ice. Republicans presented graphs of rising gasoline prices. Democrats held up economic models showing that cap-and-trade would cause only modest increases to gas and electricity prices. Republicans warned of the effect higher energy prices would have on an increasingly fragile economy. It was as though the entire Senate had not moved an inch since 1997, when it voted 95–0 to reject the Kyoto treaty.

A closer look at this episode reveals that the cap-and-trade model of climate legislation, which many in Washington believed had achieved bipartisan consensus, remains out of reach. And all the assumptions behind cap-and-trade—that markets are efficient, that the federal budget deficit limits any new investment, that emission caps will be firm and free from political manipulation—have either been put to the test and failed or rendered obsolete by the economic crisis. But this lesson and the economic crisis also open a new and more promising path to halt climate change.

THE DEBATE OVER cap-and-trade legislation in June began to turn against Democrats almost as soon as it began. As Republicans prepared to introduce amendments that would have suspended the cap if it raised gasoline prices—which no one doubted it would—panic set in. Democrats started to flee the legislation, and senior Democratic staffers in the Senate were quoted anonymously in *Roll Call*: “This is what happens when the committee staff and the chairman get so deep into the weeds of the bill that they can no longer see the political realities,” said one. “Boxer is walking us off a cliff,” said another.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid quickly orchestrated a vote for cloture to end debate so Democrats could avoid voting on the legislation. “In the end, we got a stronger vote [for cloture] on a stronger bill than we had three years ago,” says Fred Krupp, president of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). But support for cap-and-trade has steadily eroded, not increased. In 2003, cap-and-trade received 43 votes. In 2005, it received 38 votes. Had the 2008 bill actually been voted on, green lobbyists and Senate staffers said, it would have received no more than 35 votes.

Emboldened by their victory, Republicans doubled down, and before long, the Republican presidential nominee who bragged of his support for cap-and-trade denied that he had ever supported the “cap” part and joined in the “drill here, drill now” mantra. Public opinion shifted toward lifting the ban, and by August, Obama, Reid, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had all reversed their opposition.

Then the global financial crisis hit. The first casualty was Stéphane Dion, Canada's Liberal Party candidate for prime minister, who had made taxing carbon pollution a central focus of his campaign. With the global economy tipping into recession, it should have been a good year for the opposition. But instead, voters gave Conservatives 19 more seats in Parliament. Around the same time, European governments began quietly scaling back their climate commitments. A new report revealed that Europe would only meet its Kyoto targets by purchasing highly dubious carbon offsets.

Ironically, the economic crisis that appears likely to seal the fate of cap-and-trade legislation in the next Congress



ensured the election of Barack Obama and the largest Democratic congressional majority in a generation. But the circumstances in which the new president and Congress take power are radically different than those that greens optimistically envisioned when they planned their dress rehearsal last spring.

Obama faces the deepest recession the United States has seen in decades, a failing health system, and a crumbling infrastructure. His top priority will be to get the U.S. economy back on its feet. Yet there is little evidence that greens have come to terms with this reality. Like conservatives who see tax cuts as the solution to all problems, greens are now offering carbon auctions and energy taxes as the answer to the economic crisis. "Capping global warming pollution and auctioning off the pollution rights will inject \$150 billion into the economy each year," Krupp of EDF told his members in an Oct. 24 e-mail.

But auctioning carbon permits does not, in fact, inject any new money into the U.S. economy. Requiring industry to purchase pollution permits functions the same as a tax. Anyone old enough to remember the beginning of the Clinton presidency will recall that greens and Democrats have tried to raise money through environmental taxes before. During the formulation of Clinton's first budget, Gore and green groups convinced the president to propose a British thermal unit (a measurement of heat, also known as a BTU) tax on all nonrenewable energy sources. Environmental groups had pushed similar proposals for years, seeing them as a way to encourage conservation, efficiency, and use of renewable energy sources (such as sunlight, wind, and geothermal heat). "The BTU tax creates an incentive to switch from coal to natural gas," the Natural Resources Defense Council's Dan Lashof told *The New York Times* in June of 1993. "If you compare the environmental benefits per dollar, a gasoline tax is just half as effective as a BTU tax."

Clinton had decided that balancing the budget would be his top economic priority rather than stimulating the economy through increasing government spending, as he had promised during the campaign. The BTU tax promised to allow him to follow through on campaign promises without further increasing the deficit, all while enacting a policy that promised significant environmental benefits. But industries required to pay more for energy will simply pass along the cost increase to consumers. The BTU tax would have, on average, raised electricity prices for consumers by 30 percent—far more in coal-dependent states like Ohio. The fossil fuel, manufacturing, and transportation industries circulated petitions and ran ads against the proposal, and the BTU tax died in the Senate. Unfortunately, Clinton had already prevailed upon House Democrats to vote for the legislation, and many of those who lost their seats in

the 1994 midterm election blamed their vote for the BTU tax. Getting "BTU'd" became Beltway slang for being hung out to dry on a difficult vote.

GREEN LEADERS ARE NOW offering President Obama the same advice they offered President Clinton: Raise energy prices. But Obama is taking power during a very different economic moment than Clinton did in 1993. Back then, as the U.S. was slowly emerging from recession, a reasonable case could be made for reducing the budget deficit. High interest rates were constraining growth, and reducing the deficit would lower interest rates. By contrast, Obama is inheriting an economy that is entering, not exiting a recession.

The longstanding conservative arguments against large deficits and government intervention in the economy have given way to a bipartisan pragmatism. Even before the recent crisis and subsequent financial-industry bailout, deficit hawks Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, who served as Clinton's treasury secretaries, publicly said that because the deficit is a smaller percentage of gross domestic product today than it was in 1992, some deficit is justified. Now Washington is under intense pressure to take a much more active role in the economy. And with a high demand for safe U.S. Treasury bonds, the cost of borrowing is low.

Deficit spending and direct government investment in the economy are in. Balanced budgets and obeisance to markets are out. Faced with a global liquidity crisis and a deep and potentially prolonged recession, government has become the investor of last resort. Congress may close tax loopholes and allow the Bush tax credits to expire, but the prospects for any kind of broad-based energy or carbon tax, or serious auctioning of pollution rights, are extremely poor. Given the recent chaos in the financial markets, Congress is unlikely to turn over the nation's energy and transportation economies to the same Wall Street firms that brought us credit-default

swaps and financial derivatives.

Greens have, by and large, missed this shift in assumptions. While we should not be surprised if environmental leaders continue to argue for cap-and-trade, it will be surprising if Obama, Pelosi, and Reid choose to follow them "off a cliff" once again.

SO WHAT SHOULD GREENS, progressives, and Democrats do in this difficult political and economic climate? While carbon pricing and pollution trading may be dead, the prospects for serious public investment in our energy economy and infrastructure are better than they have been in a generation.

Over the last eight years the Bush administration mort-



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gaged our future by cutting taxes and running up huge deficits. But while deficit spending during a period of robust economic growth is a waste, it is absolutely vital during a serious recession. Rather than sending checks to every household, the spending should take the productive form of major investments in our economic future. Those investments should be financed by their future returns to the Treasury, rather than through new green taxes, which would imperil not only the economic recovery but also the new Democratic majority. America has arrived at a Keynesian moment, and greens should embrace it rather than propose pollution taxes in the guise of economic stimulus.

The opportunity today is to make large and sustained federal investments to radically drive down the costs of clean-energy technologies, along with investing in the enabling technologies necessary to broadly deploy them. The government should invest \$50 billion a year in building the new infrastructure and promote alternatives—including carbon capture and storage, and solar, wind, nuclear, geothermal, and tidal energy—in a competitive environment where the success of these projects can be judged rationally.

Many greens and progressives worry that this investment approach would result in more public money going to technologies they don't like, namely nuclear, corn ethanol, and "clean coal." But nuclear and corn ethanol already get very large subsidies, a situation that cap-and-trade wouldn't change, whereas an investment-centered approach would deliver far greater funding for renewables, the poor stepchildren of energy policy. While there is no such thing as "clean coal," given its impact on mountains and rivers, most energy experts believe that, as the world triples its energy consumption between now and 2050, coal will remain a large component of our energy supply. Few countries will be in a hurry to dismantle coal plants, but they might retrofit them with cheap technology to capture and store carbon emissions. And that technology may help us to build inexpensive stand-alone "air capture" machines to vacuum emissions from the ambient air—prototypes of which are already up and running.

Obama has long advocated a \$150 billion clean-energy investment program, which he has proposed to pay for through carbon auctions. But on the stump and in the debates, he spent most of his time talking about his proposed investments and almost none talking about carbon auctions. Given the severity of the recession, the funds for Obama's clean-energy plan are more likely to come from deficit spending. This will strike many greens as a flawed approach to reducing carbon emissions, because, they argue, without a carbon cap or tax, there is no certainty that investments in clean-energy technologies will actually reduce emissions.

But carbon caps and taxes hardly guarantee a decline in emissions. Despite ratifying the Kyoto Accord, which included

binding caps, few nations have actually reduced their emissions at all, and global emissions growth has substantially increased. That's because virtually every nation that has established carbon caps has also included measures, either overtly or covertly, to reduce the cost of compliance, which renders the caps largely symbolic. Carbon caps have failed to reduce emissions all over the world because fossil-fuel alternatives are still much more expensive than current polluting energy sources, and voters and policy-makers are not willing to make fossil fuels so expensive that clean-energy alternatives are economically viable. If we succeed in developing the right new technologies, it might pave the way for a future cap or carbon-pricing approach that would cause less hardship and thus actually work.

Since the early 1990s, environmentalists have argued the opposite—that once the government established caps or a price for carbon, polluting industries would quickly find an inexpensive way to comply, as they did in the case of acid rain and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). But in fact, efforts to

negotiate a phase-out of CFCs failed repeatedly until the chemical company DuPont developed a low-cost alternative. Only then was an agreement achieved. And the cap-and-trade program to reduce sulfur-dioxide emissions was able to do so at costs significantly below early estimates because low-sulfur coal became widely available in the years just prior to the passage of the relevant Clean Air Act amendments in 1990.

Fortunately, some green leaders are starting to question this view. Brent Blackwelder, president of Friends of the Earth, recently called for "re-evaluating proposals that place a price on carbon such as carbon caps or taxes. For instance, a cap-and-trade program relies on the same markets that created the mortgage meltdown. In the aftermath of one of the

largest market failures in history, do we really want to trust markets to do all the work that's needed?"

For 20 years the green climate agenda has embraced two insidious orthodoxies that are rooted in market fundamentalism: Deficit spending is always bad for the economy, and we should "let the market decide" our energy future. The result has been serial political failure, skyrocketing emissions, and stagnation of energy technology. Now is the time to let go of the pollution-pricing paradigm, along with a zero-sum deficit mentality, and embrace an agenda squarely focused on public investment, building the enabling infrastructure, and making clean energy cheap. **TAP**

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger are the authors of the book Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility and the essay "The Death of Environmentalism." They are managing directors at American Enviro-nics and the founders of the Break-through Institute.

**A CAP-AND-TRADE
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DOWN. DO WE
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Culture & Books

"At America's top universities just 10 percent of the students come from the bottom half of the socioeconomic ladder."

— PAGE 41



Tommy Lee Jones in
In the Valley of Elah

MOVIES

DAMAGED HEROES

Four recent films reveal how America sees its Iraq War veterans.

BY TARA MCKELVEY

IN THE 2007 FILM *IN THE VALLEY OF Elah*, Vietnam veteran Hank Deerfield is driving to an Army post in New Mexico to look for his son. When he passes a school and notices its American flag is flying upside down, he stops to help an immigrant worker straighten it out and hoist it back up the pole. An upside-down flag is "an international distress signal," explains Deerfield (played by Tommy Lee Jones in an Oscar-nominated role). "It means we're in a whole lot of trouble."

No kidding. Deerfield's son, Mike, has gone absent without leave. Meanwhile, every day across the country, soldiers who have served in the Middle East are fad-

ing into the American landscape. Some are resuming their lives, but others—like Mike Deerfield—are finding themselves in lousy, even tragic, circumstances. (The film is loosely based on the murder of a soldier, Richard Davis, in 2003.) *Valley of Elah* is one of several new films that chronicle the challenges of the veteran's homecoming. These films include *The Lucky Ones*, released in September, *Red*, about a vet whose dog is killed (released on DVD in October), and Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, which will appear in theaters starting Dec. 17. The latter two may be about Korean War veterans, but all four movies, examined together, reveal the ambivalence that Americans

feel about the Iraq War and the men and women who are fighting it.

It is common these days to claim to oppose the war but support the soldiers fighting it. More than 869,000 Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and have since left the armed forces, and civilians are eager to embrace them as ordinary men and women who have sacrificed for their country. Yet the brutal nature of the Iraq War, with the Abu Ghraib scandal, the Haditha killings, and other violent incidents, has raised questions about the actions of individual soldiers and the consequences of the U.S. involvement in Iraq. The new films capture three views of the battle-scarred individual in society—the Good Veteran, the Damaged Hero, and the War Criminal. The Good Veteran has served honorably in wartime and comes home to a society where he is celebrated, more or less, for his sacrifice. The Damaged Hero has also served honorably, but he is treated disrespectfully back in civil-



Postwar: The upbeat “Good Veteran”-roadtrip film *The Lucky Ones* (left) and Robert DeNiro as a “Damaged Hero” in *Taxi Driver* (above).

ian society, and he goes crazy. The War Criminal, a new post-Iraq archetype, has been turned into a torturer by the brutality of the battlefield, and he faces the consequences when he comes home.

The Lucky Ones is about the first kind of veteran—the average working stiff—and it borrows heavily from the 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives*. In *Lucky Ones*, three soldiers, Fred Cheever (Tim Robbins), Colee Dunn (Rachel McAdams), and T.K. Poole (Michael Peña), meet for the first time at an airport on their way home from war, just as the characters do in *Best Years*, and travel across America. Dunn walks with a limp, Cheever has broken vertebrae, and Poole, who was hit in the crotch by shrapnel, is worried about his sex life. They drink, fight, and yell at each other, but things never turn particularly violent. When Cheever locks the keys in the car, for example, Dunn and Poole get mad—but not all that worked up. Dunn gets in a bar fight, but the damage is contained. They can cope in the “real world,” which is dotted with PetSmart stores and Hummer dealerships, backed by a soundtrack of Sarah McLachlan songs and other music you’re likely to hear in Starbucks.

Like the strip-mall landscape, these characters seem to have been expunged of authenticity. They embody the popular wish that decent men and women are fighting the war and that they’re all still decent when they return home. They may be bruised by the experience, but things turn out OK because the American pub-

lic supports them 100 percent. During a blackout at a New York airport, for example, a clerk at a rental-car agency says Cheever, Dunn, and Poole can have a car he was saving for his boss, and at a Colorado campsite three sex workers offer to provide discount services. The movie reflects the hope that this country is a place where someone will always reach out to you if you need it—especially if you’re a veteran. Whereas in *Best Years* the soldiers show psychological scars of

The new films capture three views of the battle-scarred individual in society—the Good Veteran, the Damaged Hero, and the War Criminal.

war, in *Lucky Ones*, bitterness is washed away and replaced by a cheerful, hopeful gloss. In other words, it’s a fantasy.

The Damaged Heroes in *Red* and *Gran Torino* have also served honorably in battle, but they have a harder time adjusting to life in America. In *Red*, Avery Ludlow (Brian Cox) is a Korean War vet who goes fishing with his beloved dog. Three teenagers approach him, shake him down for money, and shoot the dog. Ludlow tries to hold the teenagers accountable, turning to the law, the media, and finally his own devices. “I’m after whatever justice can come out of this thing,” he explains. Eventually, he shows up at the house of the teenager who killed his dog and brandishes a rifle, demanding that the family acknowledge his loss. Things

go downhill from there, culminating in the deaths of two people. In a similar vein, *Gran Torino* features Clint Eastwood as a veteran, Walt Kowalski, who argues with a neighborhood boy who seems intent on stealing his 1972 Ford. Like Ludlow, Kowalski is alienated from society, and he is ready to lash out if he feels he has been wronged.

These films have a cinematic history. The ultimate Damaged Hero is John Rambo, a Green Beret who was turned

into a killing machine in Vietnam and cannot seem to shake his demons in *First Blood* (1982). He comes home and, seven years later, wreaks havoc on the society that created him. This motif also appears in the 1976 film *Taxi Driver*, featuring cabbie-turned-assassin Travis Bickle, who fought in Vietnam. In these movies, veterans are not the easy-going folks seen in *The Lucky Ones*. Instead, they are socially isolated and short-tempered. They are also good at building fires and tend to have body odor. (“He smells like an animal,” says a cop, describing Rambo.) Above all, they have a keen sense of justice. “In the field we had a code of honor,” says Rambo. “Back here there’s nothing.” These men settle scores in an amoral, postwar society, and the

LEFT: MATT DINERSTEIN / LIONSGATE
RIGHT: COLUMBIA / THE KOBAL COLLECTION

films reflect an understanding that while violence is sanctioned during war, it may have a spillover effect. These acts are the responsibility of not just the individual soldier but also of society as a whole.

Perhaps the hardest genre of veteran films to watch is that which centers on the War Criminal. In *Valley of Elah*, director Paul Haggis (who won an Oscar for 2004's *Crash*) stakes out new filmmaking territory in his attempt to address the moral ambiguity of war. The result is a portrait of a decent guy who goes to war and becomes a torturer, then returns to find a society that, right or wrong, forces him to atone for his misdeeds. In one scene, a detective (Charlize Theron) brushes off Hank Deerfield's request for help in finding his son, Mike, who served for 18 months in Iraq. "He deserves better than this," says Hank. Afterward, Hank tries to find his son in the strip clubs, fast-food joints, and diners of a military town—the opposite of the cheerful, chain-restaurant backdrop in *Lucky Ones*. The search reveals a series of unpleasant truths as Hank discovers his son was transformed by his experience in Iraq. Mike, having run over an Iraqi child on a road, is consumed with guilt and, later, inflicts pain on wounded detainees. "It became a thing with Mike," a soldier tells his father. "That's how he got the name Doc."

The specter of war crimes has appeared in earlier films such as Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*. But in this 1989 movie, the main character, Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise), tries to do the right thing in Vietnam. Kovic is a Damaged Hero—and certainly not a War Criminal. In *Valley of Elah*, Mike is an enthusiastic participant in the abuse of detainees. The progression from conscientious soldier to smiling sadist happens quickly and casually, and back home, he is not portrayed as an avenger like Rambo or *Gran Torino*'s Kowalski. He gets his comeuppance.

Taken as a group, the recent films about veterans, ranging from the sunny *Lucky Ones* to the preternaturally dark *Valley of Elah*, seem to suffer from a personality disorder. They reflect both a desire to honor the soldiers and revulsion

toward the atrocities that have occurred. They are an attempt to address widespread contradictions in the perception of the war and its soldiers. *The Lucky Ones* falls short in its portrayal of veterans and how they adjust to civilian society, sugarcoating their experience. *Red* and *Gran Torino* explore some of the darkness of war, showing how it follows soldiers home from the battlefield, and

are most successful at portraying one man's experience after combat.

In the Valley of Elah is the most ambitious, taking on the wrenching subject of torture by Americans and attempting to deal with the moral swamp of the current war. In its attempt to address the war's complexity, the film is disturbing and chaotic—much like America after Iraq. **TAP**

BOOKS

A FINE MESS

FINANCIAL SHOCK: A 360° LOOK AT THE SUBPRIME MORTGAGE IMPLOSION, AND HOW TO AVOID THE NEXT FINANCIAL CRISIS

BY MARK ZANDI, FT Press, 270 pages, \$24.99

BANKING ON BASEL: THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL REGULATION BY DANIEL K. TARULLO, Peterson Institute for International Economics,

310 pages, \$26.95

THE NEW PARADIGM FOR FINANCIAL MARKETS: THE CREDIT CRISIS OF 2008 AND WHAT IT MEANS BY GEORGE SOROS, PublicAffairs, 162 pages, \$22.95

BY ROBERT KUTTNER

UNLIKE TOLSTOY'S UNHAPPY families, bouts of extreme financial unhappiness are all basically alike, with variations only in the details. At bottom, they all involve speculation, deception, and failed regulation. The beginning of wisdom is to understand what went wrong and to grasp the parallels to history's other financial catastrophes. The paramount challenge of the Obama administration will be to repair the consequences of financial collapse and make sure it doesn't recur—something we thought had been accomplished once and for all by the New Deal. It is an ill wind that blows no good, and books are already starting to appear on the crash's causes and cures.

If you need a concise guide to the collapse in all its dimensions, you can't do better than Mark Zandi's *Financial Shock*. The man has a gift for explaining in clear lay language, say, a credit-default swap or what a "liquidity squeeze" means in practice. Zandi is that rarest of creatures, the celebrity financial commentator who is also a competent economist and an honest one. Far too many of the

other financial "experts" who dominate the cable channels are basically stock touts. Zandi is probably quoted more than any other economist, and he may also be the only author ever to have book blurbs from both conservative CNBC host Larry Kudlow, who is one of the prime cable offenders, and liberal Congressman Barney Frank, chair of the House Financial Services Committee.

Financial Shock, which seems to have been rushed into print as the financial slide turned critical, is a tour of the entire horizon. It includes accessible discussions on the creation and metastasis of complex financial products, the collapse of regulation and supervision, and the overreliance on debt throughout the economy, as well as illuminating charts and graphs.

The best and most extensive section addresses the housing meltdown in all its facets—the regulators asleep at the switch, the opportunists on Wall Street who underwrote sub-prime bonds, the predatory storefront mortgage brokers, the foreign bankers who naively bought increasingly risky paper, and the insurance conglomerates like Ameri-

can International Group that went broke insuring the bonds. Well, not quite all its facets. Zandi, who sold his company Economy.com to Moody's Corporation in 2005, explicitly declares that he will not write about the bond-rating agencies "to avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest." The agencies enabled the entire alchemy, by turning dross into triple-A securities. A few pages later, however, he can't resist a couple of paragraphs observing how and why "the rating agencies badly misjudged the risks."

Close readers of the financial press are already familiar with much of this material, but the book is also full of new insights, generally fine syntheses, and little-publicized statistics. Did you know that in the 15 years between 1989 and 2004, the indebtedness of the lowest-income Americans more than trebled? Or that upward of 80 percent of the bond products backed by sub-prime mortgages got triple-A ratings?

Zandi, whom the McCain campaign listed as an adviser, nonetheless plays it straight and usefully contradicts the Republican storyline. After the Bush administration passed the American Dream Downpayment Act in 2003, as part of the so-called Ownership Society, Zandi writes that the administration "put substantial pressure on Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to increase their funding of mortgage loans to lower-income groups." It was this pressure, and not the Community Reinvestment Act, that pushed Fannie to purchase sub-prime loans.

The book, which went to press in early summer, is marred by a few small mistakes and a recovery plan that aims too low. Securitization, he writes, was

born in the 1970s, but the original Federal National Mortgage Association was turning mortgages into bonds in the 1930s. In fact, big banks were converting sketchy loans into securities back in the 1920s, and this practice was one of the causes of the Crash of 1929. Zandi also declares prematurely that "the worst of the crisis appears to be over." Well, no. And his rather feeble remedies match his optimism: voluntary write-downs of distressed mortgages, licensing of mortgage brokers, better data. He also calls the Paulson "Blueprint for Financial Regulatory Reform" a "reasonable roadmap," which is far too kind. Still, his history of how the crisis came about makes the book a useful read.

WHO WILL CLEAN UP THE MESS? One person who may play a leading role is Daniel Tarullo, a senior economic adviser to Barack Obama who despite his low profile in the campaign has been the president-elect's top man on financial regulation. A professor of law at Georgetown, Tarullo is one of the world's leading critics of what turned out to be perverse efforts to regulate banking internationally. Those who wonder whether Obama will have the nerve and the will to do what is necessary should be reassured by Tarullo's new book, *Banking on Basel*.

This is a fairly technical book, but it can be read and appreciated by the non-economist who wants to understand how global efforts to keep up with speculative bank maneuvers failed as dismally as domestic regulation did, and what should be done now. The crisis showed how toxic products that originate in one country can infect the entire system and why a lot

of regulation will need to be done globally. Next time, we had better get this right.

Tarullo begins by recounting the gradual appreciation by national regulators three decades ago that global banks presented a thicket of global problems, involving both fair competition and adequate regulation. As banking became global but regulation remained national, a bank with more lenient regulatory standards in its home country could take those lax rules along when it operated elsewhere.

But as Tarullo explains, the resulting global standards on bank capital known as the Basel Accords intensified the potential for financial collapse. They were far too weak, relied on the bank's own models of risk, and had the unintended consequence of encouraging banks to move financial transactions off their balance sheets—one of the main causes of the meltdown. This is the kind of specialized book that typically does well to sell a thousand copies, yet it deserves a much wider readership.

As Tarullo recounts the history, by the 1970s the ratio of banks' capital to their loans had been gradually declining everywhere, as banks increasingly borrowed money that they could re-lend at higher rates, or financed long-term loans with short-term deposits, and began experimenting with more complex products. Capital ratios, however, were particularly low in Japan, where the Ministry of Finance kept a close watch on bank activity and in return tolerated high ratios of leverage. Japan's industrial miracle was heavily bank-financed. Its industries enjoyed not just government protections but low capital costs.

As Tarullo reminds us, the 1970s were also the era when many Americans were worrying that Japan's government-led industrial policy was crowding out U.S. industry. Something of the same was occurring in banking. In 1974, the three largest banks were American, followed by four French, British, and German banks. By 1988, the seven largest were all Japanese.

One possible remedy was to negotiate common global floors on capital ratios, to prevent high leverage in Japan or elsewhere from producing artificial



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competitive advantage. With high leverage, you could be a very large bank with very little capital. Moreover, high leverage also increased systemic risk, since a few bad bets could wipe out a thinly capitalized bank with ramifying effects through the world economy. But when experts brought this concept of global capital regulation before the House Banking Committee in April 1988, Tarullo reports, all of the questions were about the effect on banks' market share: "Not a single member of the committee inquired whether the proposal was adequate to protect the safety and soundness of the financial system."

Because this was also an era when proponents of deregulation or self-regulation were in power in the major nations, the first Basel Accord, negotiated in 1988, relied heavily on the banking industry's own definitions of risk. Riskier assets required more capital reserves. But the ink was scarcely dry on the first Basel Accord when it was overtaken by more complex financial products. So a second agreement was negotiated in this decade. The details are extremely technical, but the basic system of "risk buckets" was preserved. When critics took a close look, however, they realized that the new criteria—again largely defined by banks themselves—would actually allow some big banks to *reduce* their capital ratios.

Citibank, which has twice been rescued by emergency infusions of Saudi equity capital, actually boasted after the release of the Basel II formula in 2004 that it could reduce its minimum capital by about 15 percent. Even worse, Basel II made private bond-rating agencies official arbiters of risks.

By putting all their eggs in the basket of capital regulation, the designers of an embryonic process of global bank regulation bypassed all the other possible regulatory instruments such as tighter supervision of actual bank behavior. By the time Basel II was endorsed by major nations, the credit crisis was upon us.

Over time, an approach that was conceived and structured primarily to address concerns of *fair competition* came to be relied on as a core regulatory source of *safety and soundness*. Only after

the damage was done, Tarullo reports, did the experts at Basel recommend that banks be required to reserve more capital against risky assets like off-balance-sheet entities and sub-prime loans.

Tarullo, in polite and guarded language, judges the Basel process a failure. The Basel experience, he writes, should "strengthen the case for more robust supervisory attention." He adds, "It seems improbable that *any* form of

Soros wants the financial system reformed to the point where people like himself would have to find some other use for their talents.

capital regulation will be able to bear the regulatory weight."

The venue for negotiation of these two agreements is a little-known group called the Basel Committee, first created in 1974. Its deliberations are secret; it takes no public testimony; its constituents are national governments and the banking industry. The failure of the two Basel Accords to prevent the collapse of 2007–2008 is a powerful indictment of what passes for global financial regulation, both in terms of process and outcome. As we do the job of banking regulation properly, both nationally and globally, it needs to be not just more robust but more transparent. Devising proper global regulation can be understood as an aspect of expanding global civil society. Facing this challenge, Obama is fortunate to have an adviser as expert and public-minded as Tarullo.

IN ALBERT CAMUS' NOVEL, *LA CHUTE* (*The Fall*), the narrator is a former successful Parisian lawyer tormented with guilt after he fails to rescue a young woman committing suicide. The character calls himself a "judge-penitent." Consumed with remorse, he is also the judge in his own case.

George Soros has appointed himself the judge-penitent in the case of civil society versus global capitalism. He is in the morally ambiguous role of having profited handsomely by exploiting the anomalies and perversities of an unregulated global financial system that he deplores in his

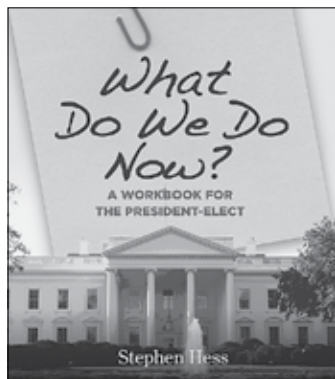
role as citizen. He wishes that the system would be reformed to the point where people like himself would have to find some other use for their talents.

In addition to being one of the world's most successful hedge-fund managers, Soros has long been a philanthropist on behalf of global open society, a crusading reformer, as well as a philosopher of capitalism and its ills. (Disclosure: The *Prospect* has been a grantee of one of his

charities, the Open Society Institute.)

In his latest book, Soros includes a pithy and persuasive discussion of the dynamics of the financial collapse, as well as a recapitulation and updating of his basic theory of "reflexivity," which he has explained in greater detail in earlier books. Reflexivity is Soros' word for irrational positive-feedback loops. He describes how speculative bubbles can feed on themselves, far removed from economic realities. Because human behavior will never be totally rational and the future will never exactly replicate the past, relying on financial models to govern capitalism is doomed to produce more cycles of bubble-and-bust. He writes, "In the realm of natural phenomena, events occur independently of what anybody thinks; therefore, natural science can explain and predict the course of events with reasonable certainty." But in social phenomena, Soros continues, "people base their decisions not on the situation that confronts them but on their perception or interpretation of that situation." And in turn, "their decisions make an impact on the situation."

This is a nice description of how human psychology produces financial bubbles and of the need for greater regulation. The book includes several illuminating examples of how banks managed to evade regulation, as well as Soros' own experiences as a speculator. The book is more a series of essays than a comprehensive recipe for reform but still well worth reading.



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In contrast to the Camus character, Soros has earned a clear conscience. And in contrast to other successful global financial speculators, Soros has spent much of his fortune on social reform and crusaded to end the abuses whose exploitation has made him a rich man. As a believer in his own theory of imperfect

knowledge, Soros concludes by noting that even though “we have to make decisions without having sufficient knowledge at our disposal,” letting financial markets go berserk based on unreal assumptions of self-correcting markets is an even worse alternative. The crash surely proves him right. **TAP**

BOOKS

COLLEGE FOR THE FEW

REAL EDUCATION: FOUR SIMPLE TRUTHS FOR BRINGING AMERICA’S SCHOOLS BACK TO REALITY BY CHARLES MURRAY, Crown Forum, 219 pages, \$24.95

BY DAVID L. KIRP

A QUARTER-CENTURY AGO, A then-obscure social scientist named Charles Murray hit upon a surefire formula for creating a best-seller: 1) Pick a controversial topic like welfare (*Losing Ground*) or IQ (*The Bell Curve*). 2) Make an outrageous claim, adopting a tone of sweet reason and using (often misusing) elaborate social-science tools to impress the statistically unschooled. 3) Give those at the top of the heap license to believe they got there because of merit. 4) Await the brouhaha. 5) Watch the book climb to the top of the best-seller list.

In *Real Education*, Murray turns the spotlight on higher education. He’s up to his familiar tricks: This time the provocation is that too many people go to college. Murray loves to make broad-brush, simple-sounding claims—welfare causes dependency, intelligence is inherited—and *Real Education* offers four of these “simple truths.”

No one would argue against truth No. 1, the proposition that children have different abilities. What’s important is *how* intelligence varies and what can be done to mitigate those differences. The influential 1966 report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, led many researchers to the dispiriting conclusion that what happens inside the schoolhouse doesn’t affect achievement; the decisive influences are the wealth of a student’s family and the wealth of his or her classmates’ families. Murray treats these findings as gospel, but

a lot has been learned about strategies that do affect educational outcomes. There’s abundant evidence that high-quality pre-kindergarten dramatically narrows reading and math gaps—indeed, that early education can change the arc of children’s lives. Small classes during the first years of school, as well as instruction in a carefully evaluated, word-rich curriculum, also generate higher achievement. A good example of that kind of curriculum is Success for All, a school-wide program that focuses on the early detection and prevention of reading problems.

What’s more, cognitive ability turns out to be quite malleable. Geneticists and neuroscientists have converged on the proposition that family income does matter but not as *Equality of Educational Opportunity* envisioned. Variations in ability among middle-class youngsters are mostly genetic—their genetic potential has been “maxed out,” says geneticist Eric Turkheimer. But the opposite holds true for poor children; differences among the families and communities in which they grow up explain almost everything.

Truth No. 2—that half the children are below average—is a tautology unless you live in Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegone, where every child is above average. But it’s irrelevant to the policy issue: What varieties of education best suit this array of talent?

Because Murray thinks that innate differences in cognitive ability guarantee that most people cannot do the intellec-

tual heavy lifting that serious higher education demands, truth No. 3—too many children go to college—inescapably follows. “No more than 20 percent” of students can do college-level work, says Murray, and “10 percent is a more reliable estimate.”

Putting aside the faulty statistical analysis that leads Murray to that dour conclusion, this “truth” is rebutted by the fact that about 35 percent of young adults, not 10 percent, have a bachelor’s degree. To Murray, these figures show that standards in higher education have been debased, but most undergraduates are learning something of value. University College London economist Pedro Carneiro concludes that “even if we take the most pessimistic estimates for the return to education for those outside the *elite* (who economists would call the marginal students), they are probably above 7 percent per year of college, and they are not lower for a year of a B.A. as opposed to a year of any other type of post-secondary schooling.” Employers aren’t dumb. If high school graduates were just as productive, companies would hire them and save boatloads of money.

To be sure, college isn’t for everyone. That isn’t a put-down, since not all good jobs require a college education. Workers in high-demand fields such as machinists and electricians earn a fine living. But colleges aren’t filled with overmatched 20-year-olds who’d be better off in trade school. Carneiro’s research shows that “individuals for whom a B.A. degree is truly a bad idea are just not enrolling in college anyway.”

The real problem is precisely the reverse—*too few* high school graduates are going to college. Enrollment has slid in recent years, and because education has been a powerful engine of growth, that spells trouble for the economy. The United States, which pioneered mass higher education, now ranks 10th in the world in college graduates.

As tuition skyrockets, students from poor families feel the pinch. Confronted with the necessity of earning a living, many cannot afford to invest in their futures, and admissions policies make things worse. At America’s top universities just 10 percent of the students come

from the bottom half of the socioeconomic ladder—only 3 percent come from the bottom quartile.

Astonishingly, a student whose family income is in the top quartile and whose aptitude is in the lowest quartile is as likely to go to college as a student whose family income is in the lowest quartile and whose aptitude is in the highest quartile. Simply put, “smart poor kids go to college at the same rate as stupid rich kids,” observes Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council of Education. Since Murray is committed to educating the ablest, he should be railing against a system in which wealth trumps brainpower in determining who gets ahead.

The second half of *Real Education* is a call to reinvent how colleges and universities instruct the elite, because—simple truth No. 4—“America’s future depends on how we educate the academically gifted.” Murray has half a point: No one who spends time in a big state university comes away convinced that all is right there. But mass education doesn’t have to be mediocre: Britain’s Open University (OU), which accepts all comers, demonstrates that no institution needs to feed its students intellectual pabulum. OU courses are as rigorous as those at America’s top colleges. In 2004 *The Sunday*

[*London*] *Times Universities Guide* concluded that OU’s teaching record was the fifth best in Britain—better, even, than Oxford’s. That’s like *U.S. News & World Report* ranking the quality of teaching at, say, the University of Massachusetts higher than at Harvard.

The claim that higher education is properly the province of the elite isn’t new. In 1944 Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, predicted that the GI Bill would turn universities into “educational hobo jungles.” But such snobbery has largely vanished; the major and legitimate worry now is that millions of young Americans who could benefit from higher education can’t afford it. Instead of leading the charge, Murray is years behind the times, and thankfully, his old formula isn’t working. Unlike *The Bell Curve*, his new book is more likely to show up on the remainder tables than on the best-seller lists. **TAP**

David L. Kirp, professor of public policy and law at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids-First Politics, and Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education.

BOOKS

AFTER THE MARKET MANIA

THE PRIVATE ABUSE OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST: MARKET MYTHS AND POLICY MUDDLES BY LAWRENCE D. BROWN AND LAWRENCE R. JACOBS

University of Chicago Press, 151 pages, \$15.00

THE CASE FOR BIG GOVERNMENT, BY JEFF MADRICK

Princeton University Press, 205 pages, \$22.95

BY EZRA KLEIN

THE MOST TELLING LINE IN Lawrence Brown and Lawrence Jacobs’ *The Private Abuse of the Public Interest* comes on the first page and was not written by the authors. Rather, it is a quotation from former Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey. “Markets are smart,” says Armey. “Government is dumb.” This is an enor-

mously illuminating statement. Markets, after all, are not “smart,” and smart people do not claim otherwise. Rather, markets are supposed to be *efficient*. There is a difference. A man who finds himself in a convenience store without sufficient funds for his purchase might decide that the most efficient method of obtaining cash is to rob the register. He might well

be right. But he would not be smart. He would not be wisely considering his own future or soberly evaluating the possible consequences of his actions. A Hostess cupcake is not worth jail time.

The market, however, carries no such capacity for self-reflection. It prizes efficiency above all—at least, insofar as efficiency is reflected in profit. It will squeeze profit from coal and trap heat in the earth's atmosphere. It will sell cigarettes to children and mortgage-backed securities to adults. It will build bombs for dictators and deny medical care to

We live in a mixed economy. In some cases, like education, there is government provision of services, and the market exists in the margin. In others, like the transportation industry, there is a free market, with the government curbing excesses. And in yet others, like health care, there's a mash of different arrangements. Sometimes the market does things well, and sometimes it does things poorly. Worse, Brown and Jacobs don't really offer a general explanation of when the market fails or where private-industry-plus-government-oversight is

The market carries no capacity for self-reflection. It prizes efficiency above all—at least, insofar as efficiency is reflected in profit.

the sick. It will support all manner of economic activity and do so rather mindlessly. And so we must intervene when efficiency contradicts wisdom, or profit does injury to ethics. We must impose intelligence on the market.

Brown and Jacobs' thesis is quite simple: Experience has taught us that we must intervene rather a lot. And so the move toward deregulation and privatization has brought with it a host of compensatory re-regulation and public oversight. The chaos of the market cries out for the rulebook of the government. Public functions become private functions become heavily regulated quasi-private functions. This leads to a rise in "non-fiscal governance," where the government is not purchasing the service but regulating it. "The number of pages of the Federal Register tripled between 1970 and 1975," write Brown and Jacobs, "and grew by a quarter between 1975 and 2000. In 2003, the Federal Register weighed in at a record breaking 75,795 pages." That's a lot of rules.

All this, however, says rather less than Brown and Jacobs imply. Their basic argument is that attempts to shrink government often have the paradoxical effect of enlarging it, but they're not quite able to prove the point. Rather, they prove what everyone but the market fundamentalists already knows:

superior or inferior to simple government provision of services.

Indeed, the book feels as if it's firing shots on an empty battlefield. On some level, it exists in dialogue with Charles Schultze's 1977 book, *The Public Use of the Private Interest*, which argues that government could more efficiently achieve its ends by wisely structuring private markets to ensure that competition serves the public good. Schultze's ideas were broadly adopted, and now Brown and Jacobs are arguing that the market competes better when wisely structured by the government to serve the public good. That's true, but it's arguably the same point Schultze makes. The difference is that Schultze was speaking to a consensus he considered overly statist, while Brown and Jacobs are speaking to a consensus that has fetishized the market. Fair enough, but in an age of \$700 billion bailouts and the effective nationalization of the banking industry, it seems curiously unambitious.

Jeff Madrick's *The Case for Big Government* is more in tune with its moment. Where Brown and Jacobs are arguing around the edges of yesterday's consensus, Madrick is trying to shape a replacement. As such, his book is a thoroughgoing defense of government's role in the economy, written with the broad perspective of an economic histo-

rian rather than a mere policy polemicist. Thus, a book that could have been a thudding discourse on the efficiency of the French medical system instead takes us on a bracing survey of government's role as a driver—not merely an enabler—of a growing, fair, economy. We tour the government's ability to solve coordination problems and structure markets so that information flows freely and purchase what the private sector cannot. We run through government's role in eradicating polio, building the highways, creating the higher education system, and mandating seatbelts. "This does not diminish the essential place and wondrous contribution of business," writes Madrick, "but raises the place of government as a full participant in economic history."

Of course, few argue against the proposition that the government had a role in the early days of America. Even the most radical conservative firebrands don't pen op-eds lamenting the Louisiana Purchase. What you tend to hear now is a sort of libertarian futurism: That may have been true then, but now we're in *the information age*. *The knowledge economy*. We can watch monkeys fall from trees on YouTube and e-mail while listening to Arcade Fire on our iPhones. Additionally, the economy is *globalized*.

These tend to be buzzwords masquerading as arguments. It's not exactly clear how these technological transformations consign government to the same trash heap as the Pentium 386 (or, arguably, Windows VISTA—the more things change, etc.). You could as easily argue that a globalized world makes powerful democratic institutions more relevant, and the turbulence of mobile economic arrangements underscores the need for a stable social safety net. "The Internet is a marvel with widespread consequences for communications, knowledge, politics, and even personal freedom," writes Madrick, "but so were the telegraph, telephone, and the television ... the myopic appeal of 'future shock' is the glamorous and self-important claim that we are now different. We are, however, always different."

Different is not, however, always good. During the past few decades, as government has retreated from the marketplace, wages have fallen or stagnated, while costs of major expenditures such as health care have shot up. In Madrick's view, the rise of free-market ideas and America's anemic, unequal economic performance are directly related. "Look what has happened to America in the last 35 years," he says, "when this ideology was ascendant."

Here, Madrick does not quite prove his case. Conservatism has not distinguished itself in recent years, but it isn't solely responsible for the slowing of the American economy. Some of those buzzwords—"globalization," in particular—refer to developments that have played a role in the slowing of the American economy and the decline of good wages for unskilled labor. He also has some odd hobbyhorses, including a clearly complicated relationship with the impact that women entering the work force has had on the role of men (he frequently laments the "self-esteem" men have lost now that they can no longer act as sole breadwinners for their families).

Moreover, it's not obvious that Madrick's proposals would do all that much to solve the fundamental problem of declining wage growth: Funneling another 3 percent of gross domestic product per year toward social spending is a curiously modest proposal for such an intellectually ambitious book.

But it's a start. And it is, at least, the right approach: We have spent much of the past 35 years trying something that has clearly not worked. Schultze had good reason to theorize about the powers of the private interest in service of the public good, but it turned out that the private interest was more concerned with, well, the private interest. That's not to throw the baby out with the bathwater: We need efficient markets. But we also need wise government. And that requires recognizing, as Madrick does, that government has often been used quite wisely, and realizing, as Brown and Jacobs do, that markets routinely prove quite dumb. **TAP**

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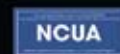
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Blaming History

BY MICHAEL TOMASKY

SO THE ASSIGNMENT IS “A BOOK THAT CHANGED MY view of politics.” Harder than it sounds. I will confess that when I was a younger man, I was far more likely to think of records, as we used to call them, as life-changing, and if pressed, I could probably to this day defend the

proposition that *The Basement Tapes* taught me as much about America as did, say, either John Steinbeck or V.O. Key.

I could name something predictable by Schlesinger or Hofstadter, or one of those seminal works on the 1960s or Watergate that I and most other American liberal males of my generation display on our shelves and in select cases have actually read to completion. But the idea of “life changing” led me to reach into the memory hole for those rare occasions when reading a book so fired my mind that, while I was immersed in it, I could think of nothing else. You know the feeling: You can’t wait for work or class to finish so you can plow back into the book; as you near the end, you actually slow down because you don’t want it to stop and can’t imagine not being able to read it anymore.

IT TURNS OUT THAT IT’S A NOVEL, Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*, that met for me the above criteria: The book is quite political and contains within its pages lessons about how people adapt to the larger political contexts in which they live. These are lessons that were and are more universal than one might assume—given that Kundera was assaying totalitarian society—about what can happen when the stirrings of the soul are thwarted by the imperatives of the state.

At the time, I was in graduate school, reading lots of political philosophy and

a smattering of political science. I was also more or less alone in New York City. I guess the larger world and the solitary individual’s precarious place within it were very much on my mind. I needed both meditative context and comic relief, and *The Joke* provided them.

You may know the basic story. Ludvik, a young Communist of the late 1940s, becomes besotted with a woman. Where he is laconic and diffident, she is ardent and pure. Rather than spend a summer yielding to his romantic advances, she chooses to go off to some Communist youth camp. She writes him letters, but they fail to express sufficient remorse at being away from his side and instead emphasize the camp’s “healthy atmosphere” and her optimism about the future of humankind. So one day, in a fit of pique and hoping to get her goat, Ludvik sends her a postcard, dashing off three thoughtless and imperishably memorable lines: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!” The passage remains, to me, one of the funniest things I’ve ever read.

Naturally, the authorities intercept the card. Ludvik is questioned, expelled, and sent to work in a rural mine. Later in life, he meets a woman who is married to

the man who, all those years before, led the effort to purge him from the party. He seduces her, but his act of revenge ends up helping his old accuser instead of hurting him. Ludvik is left to ponder the what ifs, concluding, as it is put on one Web site devoted to exegeses of the author’s work, that “since so many people were involved in the injustice of the 1950s (either doling it out or suffering the consequences) ... one must blame history, not humans, for the crimes.”

A RECENT DEVELOPMENT HAS, OF course, leant a darker coloration to the above words. An unearthed state-police document suggests that Kundera ratted out a young man who was a spy and who, because of Kundera’s approach to the police, served 14 years in a prison camp. Kundera issued a vehement denial. Several literary titans—including Coetzee, Garcia Marquez, Gordimer, Roth—have signed a letter defending him.

My distress over the allegation is minimal. As Richard Byrne wrote in October on this magazine’s Web site: “Of course Kundera was collaborating with communists in 1950! He *was* a communist!” As Byrne goes on to note, the trickier question is whether, in *The*

Joke and other works, Kundera was trying to grant himself a kind of preemptive absolution. From what I’ve read about his life, he has never seemed like what you’d call a nice guy.

But I’m an old-school, New Criticism type. Let the text stand on its own, I say. I hope the current revelation doesn’t ruin *The Joke* or his other great

early novels for future generations. Kundera gave me the highest level of pleasure and reward reading can give, so I at least owe him that much loyalty. **TAP**

Michael Tomasky writes a blog at guardian.co.uk and contributes to The New York Review of Books.

